THE ALPHA COURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS CLAIM TO OFFER AN EDUCATIONAL COURSE ON 'THE MEANING OF LIFE'

Stephen Frederick Brian  
BEd(Hons) Sussex, DipTheol Birmingham, MA Open, MPhil Lancaster

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
Department of Educational Studies, University of Surrey  
2003
ABSTRACT

THE ALPHA COURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS CLAIM TO OFFER AN EDUCATIONAL COURSE ON 'THE MEANING OF LIFE'

Many churches are currently offering a course entitled Alpha, accompanied by the apparently educational claim that it offers 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.' This thesis challenges the validity of that claim, asking the primary research question:

Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?

The thesis concludes that the claim could be regarded as valid only for those who already share the theological outlook of Alpha. The research suggests that for others within the church, and for those outside the church (i.e. those for whom Alpha is intended) the claim is not fulfilled.

It may be that Alpha is actually performing some quite different function. The secondary research question is therefore:

What is the function of Alpha's teaching?

This function appears to be primarily the expansion of its own version of Christianity within the existing church.

To contextualize Alpha, and therefore better understand its claim and function, the thesis locates Alpha within educational, historical, postmodern and sociological contexts through the use of appropriate literature. It then examines the structure of Alpha, scrutinizes and interprets testimonies of Alpha 'graduates' published in Alpha News, critiques Alpha as revealed through its own literature, looking in particular at its methods and theology, and evaluates the few significant critiques of Alpha so far in print. This contextualisation and examination helps to illuminate the conclusions drawn from fieldwork involving questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted amongst people who had no knowledge of Alpha and amongst those who had run or participated in Alpha courses. The former were asked what they would expect from any course making such a claim, and the latter were asked to share and interpret their experiences of the course, particularly in relation to the claim.

Though the fieldwork for this research took place within just two Anglican deaneries, this thesis suggests that there is no reason to suppose that the results would not be repeated elsewhere. The thesis discusses implications and limitations of the present research and suggests areas for further research.
## Table of Contents

**INTRODUCTION**  
Context, Rationale, Methodology and Acknowledgements 6

**PART ONE**  
**THE LITERATURE:**

**CHAPTER ONE**  
The Research Questions and the Educational Context 14

**CHAPTER TWO**  
The Wider Context:  
(i) The Historical Context 22  
(ii) The Postmodern Context 31  
(iii) The Consumerist Context 45  
(iv) The 'Quest for Community' Context 47

**PART TWO**  
**THE ALPHA COURSE:**

**CHAPTER THREE**  
The Structure of the Alpha Course 52

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
The Alpha Testimonies 58

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
Review of Alpha Publications 69  
(i) The Talks (*Questions of Life / The Alpha Audio Tapes*) 69  
(ii) *Telling Others* 78  
(iii) Other Alpha Resources 90  
(iv) An Alpha Conference 100

**CHAPTER SIX**  
Review of Four Critiques of Alpha 108

**PART THREE**  
**THE PEOPLE:**

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
Research Methods 131

**CHAPTER EIGHT**  
Data Analysis:  
(i) The Adult Education Centre 143  
(ii) The Clergy 157  
(iii) The Alpha Graduates 166  
(iv) The Senior Clergy 189  
(v) The Academic 192  
(vi) The Founder 194

**PART FOUR**  
**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**CHAPTER NINE**  
The Function of Alpha's Teaching 203

**CHAPTER TEN**  
An Opportunity to Explore the Meaning of Life? 216
| APPENDIX 1 | The Questionnaire | 227 |
| APPENDIX 2 | Interview Questions | 228 |
| (i) Adult Education Centre: (a) Non-Alpha | 228 |
| (b) Alpha Graduates | 229 |
| (ii) Clergy | 230 |
| (iii) Alpha Graduates | 231 |
| (iv) Senior Clergy - Archdeacon and Bishop | 232 |
| (v) Pete Ward | 233 |
| (vi) Nicky Gumbel | 234 |
| APPENDIX 3 | Sample Interview Transcripts | 236 |
| (i) Adult Education Centre (Non-Alpha) | 236 |
| (ii) Clergy | 243 |
| (iii) Alpha Graduates (Two) | 248 |
| (iv) Pete Ward | 268 |
| APPENDIX 4 | Letter to Clergy | 281 |
| REFERENCES | | 282 |
INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the context of current adult religious education within which the Alpha phenomenon has arisen and explains the rationale behind the current research questions:

Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?
and
What is the function of Alpha’s teaching?

It explains and justifies the particular research methodology used, and acknowledges those who have helped to facilitate the research.

Context

The history of education in this country has been very much bound up with the history of the church. While religious education within the churches has the aim of nurturing people in the Christian faith, nevertheless the educational agendas of church and society have been close enough to mean that, for example, church schools, with their specifically Christian (and even denominational) trust deeds, offer an education fully consonant with the demands of the National Curriculum. There has also been common ground between religion and adult education. Significantly, the first PhD in Adult Education, awarded by London University, was entitled Spiritual Values and Adult Education (Yeaxlee, 1925). Similarly, clergy in training for ministry in the mainstream denominations undertake academic theological courses accredited by universities with no particular church affiliation. An example of this practice would be the STETS course (Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme), based at Sarum College in Salisbury. Here, men and women training for non-stipendiary ordained ministry within the Church of England, Methodist Church and United Reformed Church are required to complete a Diploma of Higher Education in Christian Ministry and Mission, validated by the University of Surrey. Again, a great deal of lay adult religious education reflecting current educational practice takes place within local churches, whether leading to accredited lay ministry (Reader, Pastoral Assistant and the like) or simply deepening understanding, as in the case of courses provided by the Wey Institute for Religious Studies, sponsored by Churches Together in Surrey. More localised courses still, abound in churches.

Within the more liberal mainstream of the churches, religious education appeals to the intellect as well as the spirit and is usually designed to promote informed questioning and discussion rather than to give predetermined answers. Indeed, education itself may be regarded as an inherently Christian activity, though not uniquely so. It may also, for example, be an inherently Islamic or inherently humanistic activity (see Brian, 1997).

While this mainstream section of the churches, particularly perhaps the Anglican Church, has always valued learning for its own sake and been reluctant to stifle theological exploration (for example, the non-realism of the Anglican priest and lecturer, Don Cupitt of Emmanuel College, Cambridge), the more Catholic and
Evangelical wings of the church have traditionally adopted a more catechetical approach, i.e., that of truths to be passed on. In the last few years this latter approach has come to prominence in the Roman Catholic Church through the pronouncements of a conservative Pope (as in AD TUENDAM FIDEM, Family, Oxford, 1998) and in the Evangelical churches through the rapid growth of a phenomenon known as the Alpha course. It is this latter phenomenon which provides the focus of this thesis.

Rationale

My own interest in Alpha arises as the result of the coming-together of a number of strands in my personal and professional background, experience and praxis. Firstly, as the vicar of an Anglican parish church in suburban Surrey, I find myself in the heartland of Alpha. It apparently flourishes best in well-to-do Evangelical parishes similar in type to Holy Trinity Brompton (popularly known as ‘HTB’), the ‘home’ of Alpha. Thus, in this area, running Alpha courses is the rule rather than the exception in most denominations including the Church of England. For anyone involved in church life it is difficult not to encounter it from time to time. Secondly, having grown up within the conservative Evangelical tradition (though having moved since to a more theologically liberal and ecclesiastically central position) I have maintained an informed interest in developments in that sphere of Christianity. Thirdly, I have always been involved in religious and theological education, initially as a school teacher in secondary education, latterly as a trainer of Readers within the Diocese of Blackburn, and currently as a tutor for STETS (see above). My academic qualifications are in religious studies, theology and education.

From its birthplace at Holy Trinity Brompton, Alpha spread rapidly throughout churches of a Charismatic Evangelical type, and its apparent numerical success has led to its adoption by many churches of other traditions as well. In September each year a national campaign is launched through posters and leaflets to promote the course in every household in the country. According to Alpha News (March-June 2001 edition, HTB) seventeen thousand courses had been run by the end of the year 2000, and a million and a half people had completed the course by the end of 1999, worldwide. A detailed register is kept of all courses run, and published three times a year in Alpha News.

According to the Alpha Website (www.Alpha.org.uk), the course was founded by Charles Marnham, a curate at HTB in the early 1980's, but it was only when Nicky Gumbel took over the course in the early 1990's that he saw the potential to transform it from what was essentially a bible study course for church members into "a powerful medium for evangelism":

The method of welcome, the atmosphere of the small groups, the food, the seating, the flowers, the sound, and the material of the talks themselves were all changed to make them as attractive as possible to the person who walked in "off the street".

He [Gumbel] emphasised to the Alpha small group leader that no question should be treated as too trivial, threatening or
illogical. Every question would be addressed courteously and thoughtfully - and none would ever be "pestered" if they chose not to continue with the course.

(Alpha Website).

The website makes no mention of the role of Ken Costa. Costa featured in a Channel 4 programme entitled The God List, shown in March 2001, and presented by Jon Snow. Costa is chairman of UBS Warburg and a churchwarden at HTB. He is credited with transforming Alpha from a local course into a worldwide phenomenon:

Snow:
When Costa joined forces with the vicar of HTB and his old Cambridge friend, barrister Nicky Gumbel, Alpha was transformed into a sophisticated exercise in religious marketing.

Lord Brian Griffiths:
I think it was they who really made it into what it is today, which is a major international brand in the Christian faith.

Costa:
I was watching to see whether Alpha really had the capacity to be rolled out across the nation and to have an effect in changing the face of Christianity in Britain. I believe it does.

Gumbel:
Ken is a visionary. For example, he was the one who first suggested a conference for church leaders, and we put on a conference here. A thousand church leaders came, and, as a result of that, Alpha started to spread beyond our own local church. Now we see the need to go to a wider partnership and Ken is effectively heading up "Partners of Alpha" - the financial "Partners of Alpha".

Snow:
Costa and other enthusiasts have brought this change to the centre of mammon: the City of London, where faith and finance now work hand in hand.

Costa:
I've seen people's lives changed in the city. God changes people's lives for the better.

Lord Brian Griffiths:
I think of Ken Costa as one of the best British bankers in the city. He can close a deal very well, and I think what he's done is he's brought that expertise, in a contemporary way, to reaching out to
people who are not Christian, and I think he's done it in an extraordinary way.

The use made of contemporary culture and the marketing of Alpha is examined elsewhere in this study (see esp. Chapter Two).

The Alpha website describes the Alpha course as follows:

*Alpha* is a 15-session practical introduction to the Christian faith. It's aimed especially at people who don't go to church.

The syllabus for the course is contained in the book Questions of Life. Some courses are held during the day. Most are evening courses. At the evening events, there is a light meal followed by a talk on a subject central to the Christian faith. Then participants break into pre-arranged groups of around 10-12 people (in which they remain for the entire course) to discuss the talk in an environment where each person should feel free to ask or express whatever they wish. A team of around three or four "leaders" or "helpers" from the host church are attached to each group. There is also a weekend away during which the subject of the Holy Spirit is addressed.

Also on the same website, Sandy Millar, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, writes of Alpha: "Stripping the gospel down to its bare essentials, it makes Christianity accessible to men and women of today's culture." Featuring most prominently on the homepage of the Alpha website and on the posters displayed in public places, is the following description and claim: "The Alpha Course is a fifteen session program (sic) which runs over ten weeks to provide a practical introduction to the Christian faith. It offers the opportunity to explore the meaning of life."

However, the apparently authoritarian and fixed nature of this course (the name and content are protected by copyright) and the non-negotiable 'truths' which are promulgated in the name of orthodoxy ("the issues about which we are all agreed as Christians" [Gumbel, 1998]), in contrast to most other forms of adult education, theological or otherwise, and its coming to prominence amidst the uncertainties of postmodernism raise questions about what precisely is being offered, what its function is, and what effect it is really having on individuals and churches. This thesis will address these concerns, examining the content and nature of Alpha's curriculum, the way it is marketed, people's reactions to it, its claims to success, and in particular its much publicized claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.

As mentioned above, the content of the talks is contained in Gumbel's book, *Questions of Life*, published in 1993 and frequently reprinted since then. The talks can be given by a local speaker or they are available on audio-tape or videotape from HTB. Each talk lasts about forty minutes. The titles of the talks are:
Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant?
Who Is Jesus?
Why Did Jesus die?
How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?
Why and How Should I Read the Bible?
Why and How Do I Pray?
How Does God Guide Us?
Who Is the Holy Spirit?
What Does the Holy Spirit Do?
How Can I Be Filled with the Spirit?
How Can I Resist Evil?
Why and How Should We Tell Others?
Does God Heal Today?
What about the Church?
How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

The content of this book and of other HTB Alpha publications are examined in the thesis (see esp. Chapters Three and Five). Broadly speaking, the course content reflects the Charismatic Evangelical stance of HTB. It is Charismatic in that there is, for example, considerable emphasis on physical manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit based on an understanding of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in particular glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and the encouragement of the expression of emotions (e.g. weeping, hugging etc.). It is Evangelical in that it claims to reach new people for Christ, encourages new converts to engage in mission to win yet more, and places emphasis on individual acceptance of the atoning effect of Christ's crucifixion (a "penal substitution" theory of atonement). However, the apparent numerical success of Alpha has made it attractive to churches of other traditions as well. The course also claims to be ecumenical in the sense that denominations are not considered important, but doctrinally the stance has to be Evangelical if the course is to be workable without significant alteration (prohibited by the copyright statement) though there is anecdotal evidence that the course is in practice adapted to the emphases of individual churches. Issues such as baptism and eucharist, which would cause disagreement across denominations, are avoided. The use made of the bible is selective and conservative though not literalistic (i.e. proof texts are used with little regard for context or scholarly biblical criticism, but the reader does not have to believe that the world was created in seven literal days of twenty-four hours).

Very little of any substance has yet been written about the Alpha phenomenon (see Chapter Six). The most sustained critique has been Stephen Hunt's sociological analysis, Anyone for Alpha, published by DLT in 2001, but there has been no real, substantial attempt to analyse its content, theology and techniques or to contextualize it educationally, historically or socially. There is anecdotal evidence of unease about it, particularly amongst some church leaders, but public criticism of Alpha from church leaders is rare - even non-existent - perhaps because Alpha represents a sector of the church which appears to be producing results in terms of
recruits and money, and as such wields ecclesiastical power and influence, and appears to have the approval of the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

As far as measuring the success or otherwise of Alpha is concerned (and what counts as success in matters of religion is itself not clear) the only assessment, apart from Hunt's, and largely in terms of numbers of courses and participants, is that of HTB itself. Certainly no attempt has yet been made to assess whether or not the Alpha course fulfils its claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, nor even to discover what such a claim might mean to the unchurched. Further, there is the question of whether Alpha is essentially evangelistic, catechetical or educational. It uses the language of education (‘a course’, ‘exploring’) yet claims to be evangelistic (to win people for Christ) but has a catechetical style ("these are the things upon which we are all agreed"). This research, then, explores whether or not Alpha does indeed offer the claimed opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and, if it does not, what it actually does offer. This testing of the claim of Alpha to offer such an exploration inevitably leads to an examination of the actual function of Alpha which takes place in practice within the Church. Hence, the secondary research question seeks to discover the function of Alpha's teaching in terms of its content and practice. This in turn raises theological, and in particular ecclesiological issues.

**Methodology**

In seeking to answer these two questions, this thesis explores the nature of an extraordinary phenomenon, and does so because of the influence that phenomenon is exerting on a growing number of people and the prominent place that it is taking in the life of the Church across all the major denominations in the United Kingdom and, increasingly, in other countries as well. In claiming to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, the Alpha course is making a claim which it knows will go deep into the psyche of every thinking person. Such a grandiose project needs serious attention from those outside of it.

So how does one measure whether Alpha is indeed offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life? If one knew what the meaning of life was and could express it simply, then presumably one could just look at the content of Alpha and see how it measured up. But we do not have such access, and ‘the meaning of life’ is an elusive notion. Indeed, it would probably be impossible to find two people who would have the same understanding of what it means. What can be done, however, is to find some consensus as to the sort of issues that a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life might address if it is to have any relevance to the people it claims to be for.

To find such a consensus using a detailed questionnaire would inevitably entail the foreclosure of so many possible answers that it would simply not do justice to the people completing it. Indeed, any research involving the exploration of something as profound as the meaning of life is not going to give itself easily to quantitative research methods. The balance has to be struck between allowing people to express
their thoughts, which may be very diverse, partially formed and not easily articulated, and keeping the project manageable and meaningful. For these reasons, it may not be possible to reach one clearly defined ‘conclusion’ of the type appropriate to quantitative research but it should be possible to give an indication as to whether it is achieving its goal.

In seeking to address the two research questions, this thesis examines the Alpha phenomenon from a number of perspectives. There has as yet been little such attention forthcoming. If it is claiming so much then its credentials need checking in some detail. In a recent article in the Church Times, Roger Arguile, an Anglican clergyman, commented: “Surprisingly, given its popularity as a tool for evangelism, the Alpha course has not been subjected to serious evaluation and criticism. Any movement requires scrutiny, both of its intellectual credentials and of its activities” (Arguile, 19th July 2002, p.16). This thesis attempts such scrutiny and evaluation, particularly of its central claim, by means of encounters with individuals who have direct experience of it. It seeks to shed light on people’s expectations of Alpha, their experience of it, how they interpret that experience, and the effect that it has had on them. The thesis also attempts to understand the function of Alpha’s teaching content and methods. In so doing it seeks to understand the cultural and theological framework within which Alpha operates, and thereby impose an analytical framework upon it. Hence the thesis has two strands, the first of which might be described as theoretical, and the second as practical and analytical.

The dearth of critical literature written in relation to Alpha means that a simple literature review would not be appropriate here. Instead, literature which might help to facilitate an analysis of the Alpha phenomenon has been used throughout the thesis to fulfil that function. The first strand of the thesis in particular comprises an analysis of relevant literature written from a variety of perspectives. This strand will utilize, primarily in Chapters One and Two, a range of literature to examine Alpha within its wider cultural context, bringing to bear educational, historical, philosophical, and sociological, perspectives. Literature itself plays a key role in Alpha, especially on the part of those who run the courses, and there has been a proliferation of books, leaflets, audio-tapes and videotapes produced by Holy Trinity Brompton (the headquarters of Alpha) to support the course, so these are examined in Chapters Three and Five to help understand and critique both how Alpha operates and its theological assumptions. This strand will also include an examination, in Chapter Six, of the few significant critiques of Alpha published so far.

The second strand overlaps with the first in that it includes an analysis of thirty-six published testimonies of Alpha Converts (see Chapter Four). It also involves fieldwork within an adult education centre and two Church of England deaneries, and makes use of open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. It proceeds (see Chapters Seven and Eight) by way of multiple case studies involving Alpha ‘graduates’, clergy (both parochial and senior), Alpha ‘drop-outs’, an academic, the founder of Alpha, and some who have never come across Alpha.
The final section of the thesis utilises results drawn from the two strands to draw conclusions regarding Alpha's claim, and determine what qualifications must be imposed on any such conclusions. Conclusions are drawn concerning the function of Alpha's teaching as well as its educational claim, and future areas for research are suggested.

Whilst this research is not easily classifiable, it is clearly qualitative, involves grounded theory inasmuch as it is concerned with "what is going on" (Glaser 1978), and is "critical" in that, by attempting an external and realistic assessment of Alpha, albeit in a limited geographical area, it may help people to make informed judgements about Alpha's usefulness, and is therefore part of "the struggle for a better world" (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, p.140).

Acknowledgements.

I am grateful to all those from the adult education centre who completed questionnaires and allowed themselves to be interviewed, and to the principal of the centre and her tutors who were extremely helpful in allowing me access to their institution. I am also grateful to all who completed the pilot questionnaires. I would like to thank the two rural deans for their cooperation, as well as the clergy, Alpha graduates, archdeacon and bishop, all of whom generously gave up their time to answer my questions. I am grateful to Pete Ward and Nicky Gumbel for allowing me to interview them also in person, and to Peter Brierley of Christian Research for allowing me to question him over the telephone. I would also like to express my thanks to Professor Peter Jarvis for supervising this PhD project.
PART ONE - THE LITERATURE

The Alpha phenomenon has appeared at a particular point in time and began life in a particular location. Though it is a product of the church, it cannot be detached from the wider context in which it has arisen, and an examination of its nature, content and methods can only benefit from the utilization of wisdom from other disciplines. As this thesis is focusing on Alpha's educational claim, the primary context for an examination of Alpha must be the educational. The others follow.

Chapter One - The Research Questions and the Educational Context

The 'Rationale' (see Introduction) for this thesis describes links between the history of education in this country and that of the church. It is this historical link which makes Alpha's educational claim (an opportunity to explore the meaning of life) and its offer of a 'course' (a well-known educational method) apparently unremarkable. But this research examines that claim and seeks to discover the actual function of Alpha's teaching. Hence the two research questions are:

Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?

and

What is the function of Alpha's teaching?

This chapter explores the educational context in which Alpha is operating, and in which this research has taken place. This thesis could have begun by discussing the nature of education from first principles, how it differs from indoctrination, and what its relationship with evangelism might be. The research into Alpha would then have formed a case study to throw light on this discussion. In fact the thesis takes a slightly different course. The focus of the research is essentially on Alpha's educational claim and the function of its teaching, and the issues of indoctrination, adult religious education and adult Christian education have been discussed only insofar as they are relevant to these two research questions.

The Church continues to value learning both within its own institutions and in its utilization of secular educational establishments. However, the relationships between training, teaching, education and learning are often unclear and in the discourse of the church the words are sometimes used almost interchangeably. In this respect, the church has lagged behind the wider educational world. In schools, there has been a move away from 'Scripture', 'Religious Instruction' or 'Divinity' towards 'Religious Education' or, more recently, 'Religious Studies', as it became increasingly apparent that schools did not comprise the gathered community of the faithful, and the subject of religion has had to justify itself in educational terms to maintain its place in the curriculum. The climax of this re-evaluation was the 'Durham Report on Religious Education' (The Fourth R, SPCK, 1970) which produced forty-seven recommendations for change with regard to religious education and assemblies in schools. Parallel changes occurred in higher education with the growth of departments of 'Religious Studies' in universities, adopting a phenomenological approach to the study of religion, replacing departments of theology which appeared to assume a Christian commitment on the part of students and staff. Many
universities, reluctant to adopt this change completely, have compromised by maintaining departments of 'Theology and Religious Studies', though purists would argue that RS actually embraces theology, rendering the dual title unnecessary.

Similarly ‘Teacher Training Colleges’ became ‘Colleges of Education’ in recognition of a broader, more student-centred approach, rather than a narrow skills-and-knowledge approach which ‘training’ seemed to imply. Within the church there is a more ambivalent attitude, so that courses for people entering ordained ministry have titles like: ‘The Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme’. Indeed, of the thirteen part-time courses operating in England and Wales listed in the 2000/2001 edition of Crockford’s Clerical Directory (CHP), eight have the word ‘Training’ in their title, two have the word ‘Education’ and none has the word ‘Learning’. However, given their fairly narrow vocational function, the latter is not altogether surprising. One would need to examine their mission statements, aims and objectives to glean fully their intentions, but that is beyond the present brief. The issue here, introduced in the ‘Rationale’, is to identify the educational function of the Alpha Course.

Alpha’s claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life is clearly designed to appeal to anyone seeking an open-ended learning experience. In this sense it demonstrates an awareness of, and correspondence to the shift described above from a didactic to a more circumspect approach to religious education. It may be, however, that the reality of Alpha is actually a return to a more dogmatic form of religious education, common in schools before the debates of the nineteen-sixties and the changes of the nineteen-seventies in the wake of the Durham Report (see above). To discover whether Alpha, despite its claim, does indeed represent a return to a more dogmatic form of religious education, albeit for adults, it may be helpful to revisit some of the discussion about the relationship between education and indoctrination which took place in that period.

Generally speaking, ‘indoctrination’ is regarded as a pejorative term, describing a process thought to be undesirable. John Wilson, an educationalist writing in 1964, was clear about this:

‘Indoctrination’ represents....something pernicious, though we are not quite sure what: an area whose frontiers, if only we knew where they were, we do not want to cross.
(Wilson, 1964, p.26).

I. A. Snook also believes that there is a consensus about the desirability (or lack of it) of indoctrination on the one hand, and education on the other:

‘Education’ carries a plus sign where ‘indoctrination’ carries a minus sign.
‘Education’ represents a favourable judgement on the teaching.
‘Indoctrination’ denotes an unfavourable judgement.
(Snook, 1972(a), p.103).
Snook describes the symptoms of a person who has been indoctrinated:

The indoctrinated person often tends to stock answers to difficult questions, is incompletely committed to the full ramifications of his knowledge which is rationally untouchable, immune to argument and logic.
(Snook, 1972(a), p.103).

This contrasts with the ‘educated’ man, described by Snook referring to R. S. Peters. Such a man possesses:

(i) a high degree of understanding: he is not simply trained and his responses are not drilled,
(ii) a sense of commitment to this knowledge: he respects the evidence and conforms to the standards of disciplined enquiry, and
(iii) a cognitive perspective: his knowledge is integrated in a conceptual scheme and there are no ‘compartments’ immune from scrutiny.
(Snook, 1972(a), p.103).

The educationalists, Wilson, Williams and Sugarman (1967), wish to distinguish indoctrination from conditioning or force. When someone is indoctrinated, their will is not directly overridden. The conditioned person feels a compulsion to do something which ordinarily they might disapprove of, or vice versa. If someone is forced to do something, their heart is not really in it. But the indoctrinated person can offer a reason for his belief, even though it is held irrationally. He (or she) actually subscribes to it. He thinks he has accepted the belief freely, for good reasons, but in fact he has accepted it...

when his will and reason have been put to sleep or by-passed by some other person, who has some sort of moral (as we significantly say) hold over him, by virtue of his authority or some other power-bestowing psychological factor. The indoctrinated person, as Sartre would say, is in a state of self-deception: he is sleep-walking, or (in extreme cases) double-thinking.
(Wilson, Williams and Sugarman, 1967, p.169).

It is evident then, that indoctrination, in contrast to education, is generally regarded as a bad thing. What is less clear is precisely what counts as indoctrination. One view regards the content as the primary criterion, while another focusses on the intention of the ‘indoctrinator’.

Writing in 1964, Wilson (see Wilson, in Hollins (Ed), 1964, pp.24-46) believes it is primarily the content which defines indoctrination. He gives the example of
hypnotizing a boy to believe in Communism, which would be indoctrination, and hypnotizing him to master A Level physics, which would not. The obvious difficulty for Wilson, however, is the subjective judgement about what is desirable content and what is not. Wilson argues that the difference is between beliefs in things which are certain (mathematics and Latin Grammar) and things which are not (religion and politics). Wilson is clearly here a person of his time. He writes as a modernist, putting his faith in a rational scientific understanding of the world, which “common sense” (p.30) dictates can quite reasonably be inculcated into a child, whereas “the far more mysterious territory of metaphysics and morals” should be left alone. Indeed, not even an exploration of the diversity of belief should be allowed because children “do not want to be taken for a conducted tour round a world curiosity shop; they want to know whether any of the beliefs are true” (p.32). And that, as Wilson points out, is unanswerable with any degree of certainty. He does, however, concede the benefit of some discussion of religious, moral and political issues insofar as they impinge on the pupils’ lives, “as, for instance, questions of sexual behaviour do” (p.32).

However, writing with his associates, Williams and Sugarman, Wilson (and they) fall into the ‘intention’ category: “Indoctrination is an intentional activity: you cannot indoctrinate by accident” (Wilson, Williams and Sugarman, 1967, p.170). But ‘intention’ itself is a slippery concept to use as a defining criterion, as the same authors recognise:

But indoctrination is not wholly to be defined by the conscious aims of the indoctrinator; we should call some of the things that Roman Catholics or Communists (justly or unjustly) are supposed to do ‘indoctrination’, whatever description they gave, however sincerely, of their aims. They might say, and believe, that they were helping people to form their own beliefs rationally and freely; but this might not be what they were in fact doing. (Wilson, Williams and Sugarman, 1967, p.170).

I. M. M. Gregory and R. G. Woods (see Gregory and Woods, in Snook (Ed), 1972(a), pp.162-189) also regard the principle of ‘intention’ as rather elusive when it comes to deciding whether someone is engaging in indoctrination or not. The indoctrinator may be quite clear that he intends to get his charges to believe certain doctrines, and his motives may be quite diverse, having to do with power at one extreme, or an altruistic desire to show others the path of truth for their sake at the other, or, alternatively, he may deny that he has any intention to get particular beliefs over, rather that he is simply presenting the truth. But Gregory and Woods would still regard the latter as an indoctrinator.

J. P. White (see White, in Peters (Ed), 1979, pp. 177-191) points out that when people talk of indoctrination they often mean different things. Indoctrination may mean, “a person coming to hold a belief unintelligently, that is, without evidence”, or the beliefs may be “unjustifiable”, or, in the context of schooling, it may mean, “to stop the growth in our children of the capacity to think for themselves” (p.178). For some, a teacher is indoctrinating a pupil when “trying to get him to believe that a
proposition ‘p’ is true, in such a way that nothing will shake that belief” (p.181). In that case, there is a clear intention to indoctrinate the child. However, White, like Gregory and Woods (see above) points out that an alternative argument states that there does not necessarily have to be such an acknowledged intention. It may, for example, be that the indoctrinator has him(her)self been indoctrinated, and hence simply believes that the doctrines they hold cannot but be true:

Therefore many of them are fully prepared to accept rational discussion of these doctrines in their teaching, for they do not believe that such discussion could ever undermine them. If asked to describe what their intentions are in teaching, they say that they are trying to get their charges to think for themselves and deny that they are trying to rivet unquestionable beliefs into the mind.....

Yet however what they are doing might be described from within the religious or political system in which they are working, if viewed from outside the system, they would rightly be called indoctrinators. (White, 1979, p.182).

I. A. Snook is clearly within the ‘intention’ camp. He suggests the following as a “necessary and sufficient condition for indoctrination”:

A person indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches with the intention that the pupil or pupils believe P regardless of the evidence. (Snook, 1972(b), p.154).

A key indicator for Snook as to whether or not the teacher is indoctrinating would be the teacher’s response to a pupil who, for solid reasons, rejects his (the teacher’s) views:

If such a rejection is seen as a betrayal of all he has taught, he has been indoctrinating. (Snook, 1972(b), p.159).

Snook says that the judgement of indoctrination taking place “is dependent on the intentional bringing about of undesirable states of mind of a specified sort.” (Snook, 1972(b), p.160). There is no suggestion here, however, of who is to determine what is an ‘undesirable state of mind’.

Snook states elsewhere that “indoctrination is most likely to occur in the areas of morals, religion, and politics, for these are matters upon which informed people differ.” (Snook, 1972(a), p.68). J. P. White (see White, in Peters, 1979, pp.177-191) describes one subtle way in which such indoctrination may take place in the domain of religious education. The skilled religious indoctrinator may choose a subject for discussion such that merely to have agreed to enter into the discussion commits
oneself to a belief in God; for example, Is God one person or three? Airing their views on the subject commits the students to accepting a presupposed belief. The only belief that cannot be subjected to critical examination is the belief presupposed.

How do these insights into indoctrination illuminate the operation of the *Alpha* course? Given the pejorative understanding of the term, no supporter of *Alpha* would countenance any suggestion that indoctrination plays any part in it at all. Indeed they may regard the suggestion as insulting both to the providers and consumers of the course, and not to be taken seriously. This is problematic, however, in that no indoctrinator would ever own the title, and no indoctrinated person would ever accept that they were such. Also, the collapse of Marxism as a major force in world politics, and a more tolerant attitude towards, for example, sects on the fringes of mainstream religious organisations and towards a diversity of beliefs in general in a postmodern world, has meant that the term has become used far less. It has come to represent intolerance on the part of the user as well as the accused. Within education, the growing recognition that every teacher and every institution has their own values, and that value-free education is simply not possible may have led to a greater reluctance to use the term of another.

Nevertheless, there are some useful observations to be made. The assumption of a belief in God on the part of the participants in a course which claims to be open to all is evident, for example, in the *Alpha* course groups which ask people to discuss answers to prayer, and make frequent references to the bible as an authoritative source (see Chapter Five). Indeed the assumption is evident throughout the talks, the titles of which reflect such a presupposed belief (How does God Guide Us?, Does God Heal today?, etc.).

Nicky Gumbel, the founder of *Alpha*, would not deny that he is trying to draw people to particular beliefs, though he would not claim to be indoctrinating, simply 'presenting'. However, as Gregory and Woods point out (see Gregory and Woods, 1972, pp.162-189), in some matters (they quote the examples of Roman Catholicism and Marxism) there is an urgency and a forcefulness about these kinds of beliefs which lead to a strong urge to convince others. They are quite different from, for example, the belief that the milkman will come in the morning. They require action because there is so much at stake:

From the standpoint of the believer they have the status of universal, unfalsifiable truths, and this fact, plus the fact that the beliefs in question are of momentous concern to mankind, leads to a strong urge to convince others, the waverers, the unbelievers, of their essential truth. It becomes important to persuade others to believe.

(Gregory and Woods, 1972, pp.162-189).

Gumbel may claim that what he is attempting with *Alpha* is to offer people an 'exploration', even though he actually seeks to implant his own particular interpretation of Christian faith. However, if Gumbel is certain that the doctrines he
holds are true, then he would not see what he is attempting as indoctrination, even though it may look like that viewed from the outside. He may see the Alpha discussion groups as the forum for rational debate, but, because he believes that nothing said in any such discussion could possibly question the absolute truths that he holds, for him it is perfectly legitimate to ignore the outcomes of such discussions and simply press on with presenting these truths in the talks.

For Gumbel, unity in right belief is important, yet, according to John Wilson, this is a feature more characteristic of indoctrination than education, and has its origins in unrecognised fear of the unknown. It is therefore in opposition to the spirit of genuine ‘exploration’ as advertised by Alpha. Wilson encapsulates this notion that we can either be united by a common exploration of the unknown (education) or isolated by the pretence of knowledge:

The fact that we do not know something is not in itself a cause of isolation: we can join hands and grope towards an answer together. To pretend that we do know something, when we do not know it, isolates people far more: for it turns them away from reality, which is the only ground on which we can meet and communicate, and projects them into some form of fantasy-escape from the demands of the real world. Such cowardice never pays in the end. (Wilson, 1964, p.31).

Ultimately the choice we make between education and indoctrination hinges on the regard we have for the dignity of the individual: “We value the human personality, and do not want it to be diminished” (Wilson, 1964, p.33). The realisation that religious education at its best, once it leaves behind any attempt at indoctrination, can build up rather than diminish, and indeed that education and religion may have much in common in their concern for the pursuit of truth, opens up possibilities for a much healthier dialogue between education and religion.

Further to distance such dialogue from any implications of indoctrination, it may sometimes be helpful to speak of ‘learning’ rather than ‘education’. Certainly, Peter Jarvis’s unpublished paper, The Educational Mission of the Church to Adults - A Quest for Truth, (2002), agrees with my own MPhil thesis (Brian, 1997) that learning itself may be regarded as a religious phenomenon in that it involves seeking after truth. It is also:

...the process of human becoming. It is the process by which individuals become beings, and this might be regarded as a religious phenomenon. (Jarvis, 2002, p.88).

This contrasts with ‘education’ which, says Jarvis, is something provided by an organisation or by the state, and which is controlled by the provider to a lesser or
greater degree. Jarvis identifies two different forms of educational curriculum, the 'classical' and the 'romantic':

The classical curriculum is one in which the provider seeks to stipulate what is taught, and it is often framed in terms of learning outcomes, whereas the romantic curriculum does not specify the content so precisely and is more likely to be propounded in terms of learning opportunities. (Jarvis, 2002, p.89).

Jarvis makes a similar distinction in the realm of religion. There are those religious communities which see it as their task to provide answers, and those more concerned with the quest for truth. The former are in fact engaged on a more overtly evangelistic task, whereas the latter's approach is more concerned with learning. Alpha appears to be attempting to combine the two, and herein lies the difficulty. If it offers a course which is overtly evangelistic (and HTB claims that Alpha is an evangelistic tool) then it is likely to deter those who are interested in exploring the universal human questions and are suspicious of anything evangelistic or 'churchy'. Alpha, in its publicity, has chosen to play down its evangelistic function and appeal to a spirit of inquiry. Sooner or later, however, those who attend will discover its evangelistic agenda. But if HTB, or indeed any other church, offers a course which purely explores the great existential questions and has no evangelistic agenda, then it has to be prepared for people to reject Christianity during the course of their exploration. Jarvis recognises this:

If they [the churches] offer opportunities to seek after the truth through a romantic curriculum, they may be offering the opportunity to embark upon a genuine religious quest which might have no end. But this is a process which they cannot control, and the outcome of the learning might be one in which people reject the underlying beliefs of the Christian Church. (Jarvis, 2002, p.93).

Clearly, the degree of control which HTB exercises over Alpha is intended to ensure that the 'underlying beliefs' are non-negotiable, but then it would be a courageous or, some might say foolhardy church which saw the rejection of its beliefs as a satisfactory outcome of one of its courses. This issue is addressed further later in this thesis in the context of the analysis of interviews with clergy whose churches have run Alpha (see Chapter Eight). It is within the context of this educational debate that Alpha has emerged making an educational claim, i.e., offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and it is this claim which this research seeks to test, whilst at the same time seeking to discover what is the actual function of Alpha's teaching content and methods.
Chapter Two - The Wider Context

Alpha has come to the fore at a particular point in time and in a particular cultural context. It may be seen, for example, as a product of, or a reaction to turn-of-the-century cultural or philosophical trends, such as consumerism, the rapid rise of communications technology, or postmodernism. It may be that it identifies a sense of alienation and offers a remedy, or that it is actually using techniques of psychological manipulation that have been around for some time. This section of the thesis attempts to locate Alpha within its wider context, bringing to bear a range of perspectives (historical, postmodern, consumerist, and ‘the quest for community’) in the hope of illuminating further the authenticity of its claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life and the function of its teaching.

(i) The Historical Context

Alpha is not the first evangelistic phenomenon this country has experienced. It could be seen as the most recent manifestation of "Revival" or "Awakening". I put this point to Nicky Gumbel in a recorded interview at Holy Trinity Brompton in March 2001 (see Chapter Eight), asking him if he thought Alpha was in the tradition of movements like those of Moody and Sankey and Billy Graham. In his reply he emphasised that he was indeed hoping for a revival of faith, but that Alpha was about local churches rather than famous speakers. He wanted to see people coming to faith and being integrated into their local church.

Despite Gumbel's modest claim that this is a locally-based form of evangelism rather than one based around a famous speaker, Alpha is inextricably linked with the figure of Nicky Gumbel, not least because it is he who appears on the video and audio tapes giving the talks, and is the person upon whom the media focus. Another obvious similarity between Alpha and other historic revival movements is the emphasis on counting heads, as can be seen below.

The historian J Edwin Orr suggests differentiating definitions for 'Revival' and 'Awakening':

The logic of words suggests ‘revival’ for the revitalizing of a body of Christian believers, and ‘awakening’ for the stirring of interest in the Christian faith in the related community of nominal Christians or unbelievers.


Orr's use of the phrase "nominal Christians or unbelievers" reveals his own viewpoint, i.e. he writes from within the Evangelical constituency. Billy Graham endorses this in his reference to Orr in his own autobiography. Graham refers to his encounter with Orr in the early days of his ministry:
Other speakers included ...... evangelist-scholar J. Edwin Orr, who had received his PhD from Oxford University and was an authority on religious revivals. (Graham, 1997, p.137).

According to Orr's definitions, Gumbel would surely claim that Alpha was essentially an "Awakening", since it is intended for non-Christians. Hunt's research (Hunt, 2001) and my own (see Parts Three and Four), however, would suggest that it is closer to being a "Revival" in that it actually appeals most directly to existing Christians, in some cases changing them from their existing form of Christianity into a more Charismatic form. Orr would interpret this as "revitalizing".

Orr points to the drastic improvements in social conditions brought about by such Evangelical leaders as Shaftesbury in the last century. This went hand in hand with mass conversions. In this respect, Alpha is a different kind of phenomenon in that there is far less emphasis on a 'social gospel'. However, as stated above, a key similarity is in the claims of success made in terms of large numbers of people converted and the impact on the country at large:

In the 1870s, D L Moody rose to fame as a world evangelist. Beginning modestly in York in the year 1873, Moody moved Sunderland, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow, Belfast, Dublin, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, and Liverpool, using methods of the 1858 Revival in prayer and preaching. About 2,500,000 people in aggregate heard him in twenty weeks in London, a lasting imprint made on Britain. (Orr, 1973, p.viii).

Orr notes in particular the impact made in the universities, with "thirty thousand" student volunteers "sailing for the mission fields" (Orr, 1973, p.xiv). HTB has similarly targeted the student population with a specially adapted "Alpha for Students", "running in 70 out of the country's 122 universities, as well as 84 colleges of higher education" (Alpha News, No.24, July-October 2001, p.17).

My own research suggests that many who complete Alpha courses have had some experience of the church in the past which enables them to recognise what is being offered, rather than being entirely new to Christianity (see Chapters Four and Eight). A similar foundation in the earlier lives of converts was admitted to in a contemporary description of a Revival meeting in Lougher, Wales, in 1904, published in a newspaper article at the time, and reproduced in Orr:

Many who have disbelieved Christianity for years are returning to the fold of their younger days. (Orr, 1973, p.10).

Similarly, the suggested function of Alpha, described above, of changing people from one form of Christianity into another, is also indicated in Orr's observation that
“many converts of the Awakening were already members of Anglican parish churches” (Orr, 1973, p.47).

Just as the reasons given by Gumbel for the drop-out rate from Alpha tend to lay responsibility upon those who drop out rather than any shortcomings in the course itself (see Chapter Five) so those who did not respond to the Revival in Merseyside are dismissed by Orr with colourful alliteration:

Evan Roberts’s Liverpool Campaign stirred up hostile reactions in some Merseysiders. Besides enthusiastic Welsh immigrants, there were the scornful scoffers, supercilious cynics and curious critics. (Orr, 1973, p.37).

Sandy Millar has little time for theologians (as is shown in my critique of his ‘Ministry’ video in Chapter Five) and Orr also clearly sees those engaged in theological study for ministry as in need of Revival:

The theological college at Handsworth was moved by a spirit of prayer, confession and dedication, all regular classes abandoned. (Orr, 1973, p.38).

There may be a tendency for those involved in the promotion of Alpha to over-estimate how widely the course is recognised, particularly beyond the church. This is hinted at in the interviews I conducted with non-churchgoers, and is not a new phenomenon within revivalism. Orr is puzzled as to why there has been so little written about the 1905 Awakening in England (see Orr, 1973, p.206). He has had to derive his material from denominational and other periodicals. Orr does not recognise that the reason for the lack of records may be because of the insignificance of the events described outside of the Evangelical Christian constituency. The many figures he quotes, in terms of proportions of population or even in relation to normal churchgoing, may simply be insignificant. Similarly, despite the claims of Alpha’s success in winning new converts, there is no evidence that it has had any effect in slowing down the decline in churchgoing. Orr interprets the lack of newsworthiness as being because Awakenings and Revivals are so commonplace:


Fundamental to the Alpha course is ‘Speaking in Tongues’ (Glossolalia) and healing. The movement of the Holy Spirit is regarded as spontaneous, and emotional demonstrations are an accepted part of the whole experience. Again, there is common ground here with the Awakening of the 1900s and the Pentecostal Revival that followed it:
Pentecostalism laid its stress on two spiritual gifts, tongues and healing, and even formalized their operation....

Both [Awakening and Pentecostal Revival] stressed an unplanned ministry of the Spirit; both were emotionally demonstrative, and both also suffered from a tendency to occasional emotionalism, the exploitation of the feelings to achieve certain reactions. (Orr, 1973, p.185).

Alpha also “formalizes its operation”, as is evident from the Alpha literature (examined in Chapter Five) and is, in a sense, interdenominational - another characteristic of both Awakening and Pentecostal Revival claimed by Orr.

Orr claims that both also “took their rise from among the common people” (Orr, 1975, p. 183). In a social sense this could not be said of Alpha; in fact quite the reverse, having been founded in a well-to-do parish in London, and flourishing in the affluent suburbs. It could only be true in the sense that Holy Trinity Brompton, despite being an Anglican Church, pays little regard to the traditional accoutrements of Anglicanism in terms of liturgy and dress or, more significantly, episcopal authority, priestly ministry or parochial obligation. It could therefore be seen as in a state of moderate rebellion against the ecclesiastical structure, responding to need as it sees it on the ground. In that sense it has its roots amongst “common people” rather than being instigated from above.

The timing of the Awakening Orr interprets in religious terms. He sees it as a response to a form of “infidelity” which had arisen: “a compromise between Christianity and humanism”. This was “inspired by Freud who spoke of God as an illusion.” It was “a kind of harvest before the devastation of Christendom” (Orr, 1973, p.187). It is suggested below that Alpha may have arisen in part as a response to postmodernism.

As mentioned, Orr emphasises the ecumenical or interdenominational dimension of the Awakening of the 1900s, though there was a “total lack of response on the part of the Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox communities”. This would only change in the mid-twentieth century, “when their changing attitude to Scripture has accompanied a changing attitude to dissent” (Orr, 1973, p.187). Gumbel, however, is at pains to emphasise the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church has become involved in Alpha, though Hunt has doubts as to how representative these participating churches are of Roman Catholicism’s attitude to Alpha more widely (see Hunt, 2001, pp.50&51).

The Revival shares with Alpha an emphasis on preaching (a series of lengthy talks) and personal morality (particularly sexual ethics) and a lack of emphasis on the sacraments. All of these were already an integral part of the churches in which the Revival began, and are an integral part of the Charismatic Evangelicalism which spawned Alpha:
The background of the church life which entertained the Revival was Evangelical: an emphasis on preaching rather than the sacraments in public worship; congregational prayer meetings; family worship; personal Bible study and personal prayer; a morality based on the ten commandments, with an emphasis on the social virtues of truthfulness, honesty and sexual purity; all of this taken for granted in the churches in which revival began, though not in the areas outreached. (Orr, 1973, p.196).

In the twentieth century, in this country at least, religious revival is probably most commonly associated with the figure of Billy Graham, the American evangelist. Once again, his autobiography (Graham, 1997) is full of statistics to demonstrate the success of his ‘Crusades’ or ‘Missions’, including the ten focussed on the United Kingdom. For example, in 1954, on the first night, he drew a crowd of 10,000 to Haringey Stadium (p.233), then 65,000 (p.244), then a crowd of 100,000 to Wembley Stadium (p.233). 2,000 responded to the invitation to come forward. Two million heard Graham preaching in twelve weeks. In 1955 in Glasgow, two and a half million were “reached” (Graham, 1997, p.253).

Again the question arises as to how many of those who went forward in response to the ‘call’ at the end of each session were new converts to Christianity and how many were existing Christian believers. I attended one of Billy Graham’s huge rallies at Aston Villa football ground in 1984 during his well-publicised ‘Mission England’ campaign. Coach-loads of people arrived from churches all over the Midlands and beyond, and enthusiastically joined in the singing, and many of them went down on to the pitch at the end in response to the call for those who wished to give their lives to Christ. All those I saw in the immediate vicinity were clearly already enthusiasts for this kind of Christianity. It would be very difficult to identify new converts.

Again, as has been suggested in relation to Alpha, some may simply be converts from one form of Christianity to another (see Chapter Eight). For Graham, churchgoers are also targets for evangelism:

The devout, churchgoing husband and wife in a small Irish town, listening over the radio to the Crusade broadcast from Kelvin Hall.....decided on the spot to trust ‘the Man on the Cross’ for their salvation and held to their decision in the face of strong local criticism and family opposition. (Graham, 1997, p.253).

Like HTB, Graham’s team realised the importance of publicity right from the early days. As for Alpha, this included posters in public places with a simple slogan and a picture:
In the months before the Crusades began, striving for simplicity and clarity (and using only my photograph and the slogan HEAR BILLY GRAHAM), thousands of posters and hundreds of thousands of handbills were distributed in the greater London area. (Graham, 1997, p.210).

Again, just as Alpha claims to be offering “an opportunity to explore the meaning of life”, so Graham, nearly half a century earlier, tried to tap into a desire to address ultimate questions:

The basic questions of life are ultimately religious in nature:

Who am I?
Where did I come from?
Where am I going?
Is there any meaning to my life?

Only the God who created us can give us an ultimate answer to those questions.
(Graham, 1997, p.423).

Graham’s answer, however, was too simple for the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote in an article in Life magazine that it was:

...too simple in any age, but particularly so in a nuclear one with its great moral perplexities...... Graham offers Christian evangelism even less complicated answers than it has even before provided.
(Graham, 1997, p.301).

Just as Nicky Gumbel befriends critics, thus drawing their sting (see Chapters Six and Eight, particularly on Pete Ward) so Graham attempted the same with Niebuhr, but unsuccessfully:

I let it be known that I wanted to meet Dr Niebuhr. George Champion called him to see if he would see me, but he declined. Not used to giving up easily, George then called the chairman of the Union Theological Seminary Board, who was also a leading banker. The chairman promised that there would be no difficulty in arranging such a meeting, but he came back (as George later said) “with his tail between his legs”; Niebuhr simply refused to see me.
(Graham, 1997, p.301).

An even more recent revivalist phenomenon was that of the Toronto Blessing, which gained popularity in the early 1990’s. Like Alpha, it was closely associated with Holy Trinity Brompton and attracted huge crowds of people. Indeed, there are many similarities between the characteristics of the Toronto Blessing and the Alpha Holy...
Spirit Weekend (see Chapter Three), not least the time of ‘Ministry’, with its physical manifestations of the coming of the Holy Spirit into a person and the strange behaviour on the part of the recipient this sometimes involves (“rolling about the floor, laughing hysterically, or staggering around as if drunk” (Porter and Richter, 1995, p.5)).

‘Alpha’ was in fact an Evangelical newspaper published by HTB before it was a course, and contained reports of the Toronto Blessing. None of this is mentioned in the history of the Alpha course as described in the literature or on the website. Indeed, during my interview with Nicky Gumbel he seemed keen to dissociate Alpha from the Toronto Blessing:

SB
Still on the subject of the Holy Spirit: does the form of the Weekend away, the teaching, the time of ministry and so on, have any link with what used to be known as the Toronto Blessing? Do you see any similarities?

NG
Alpha’s been running since 1977. Questions of Life was published in March 1993. That, just from a historical perspective, is prior to anything that happened..... Toronto came to fame in 1994. The syllabus for Alpha, or that section on the Holy Spirit, has not changed.

SB
It was right there in the early days?

NG
The Weekend was there from 1982, so it’s been there for nineteen years, and the teaching has not changed on the Weekend, and the way we do the ministry has not changed....

SB
Since eighty......?

NG
No. Well, I’m not saying it hasn’t...... It certainly has not changed as a result of anything that happened in Toronto in 1994. We do exactly the same ministry. There have been times when we have seen a much more powerful response, but that has not altered the prayers that we pray or the way that we do it. It’s just that we did see an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit (I would describe it as) at one stage, which was almost like a tidal wave response to the prayer: ‘Come Holy Spirit.’ But the prayer was the same. Our
response to the prayer has ebbed and flowed, but the prayer is the same, we haven't changed the way we do anything. (Gumbel, 14th March, 2001).

Porter and Richter explain the spread of the Blessing as being due to the use of modern means of communication: faxes, e-mails, phone calls, magazine articles and popular paperbacks. They also describe the extraordinary events of the 'Ministry Time' associated with the Blessing:

Bodily weaknesses and falling to the ground. After a time of what is termed 'ministry' - special prayer by the leader or members of the leadership team - the church will often resemble a surreal battlefield, with scores of people lying on the floor. Some will be lying peacefully, some will be rolling or flailing about, some will be moving their bodies rapidly and rhythmically, even erotically, some will be making judo-like chopping actions with their forearms, some will be twitching, some will be sobbing, some will be laughing hysterically...

Shaking, trembling, twitching and convulsive bodily movements. Before or after the person falls, or independently of this, their body may twitch or shake uncontrollably.

Uncontrollable laughter or wailing and inconsolable weeping.

Apparent drunkenness.

Animal sounds.

Intense physical activity.


The 'Ministry Time' which is an integral part of the Alpha Holy Spirit Weekend appears to be a slightly moderated version of the above. This is referred to again later in the thesis when my interview with Nicky Gumbel is examined in more detail (see Chapter Eight).

Porter and Richter also make the point that a person needs to have accepted the validity of the Blessing before they can receive the Blessing itself. This is consistent with the teaching on the Holy Spirit Weekend which aims to make the coming of the Holy Spirit, and in particular Speaking in Tongues, seem like a perfectly natural expectation amongst the people present before it actually occurs.

Another similarity between the Toronto Blessing and Alpha is the talks and testimonies leading up to the 'Ministry Time':

Perhaps the most important ways by which people are introduced to the idea of the Blessing are by means of introductory talks by
the leadership and personal testimonies by recipients of the experience, within services and meetings.
(Porter and Richter, 1995, p.16).

And again there is the pressure to conform:

This [social pressure] is accentuated at some churches by the practice of removing chairs during ‘ministry time’ whilst many are standing to receive the Blessing or have already fallen; those still seated easily begin to feel ‘the odd one out’.
(Porter and Richter, 1995, p.17).

The technique of praying for people in pairs with an expectation of the Holy Spirit entering the recipient is also common to both the Toronto Blessing and the Alpha Holy Spirit Weekend. Porter and Richter write of the Toronto Blessing:

Practical guidance is later more personally mediated when members of the (lay) ‘ministry team’ pray in pairs with those wishing to receive the blessing. They may or may not make physical contact with the individual, but one of them will usually place or agitate his or her hand near the person’s forehead, whilst another will be ready to act as ‘catcher’.
(Porter and Richter, 1995, p.18).

It is evident that ‘Revivals’, ‘Awakenings’, ‘Crusades’, ‘Missions’ and the like always occur in particular cultural contexts. As mentioned above, for example, Orr saw the Awakening as a response to a form of ‘infidelity’. Also, while a critique of the spiritual state of the nation is an integral part of the gospel message being proclaimed, nevertheless, products of the culture are used to facilitate the campaign. Thus Billy Graham relied heavily on posters, electronic amplification, the use of football stadiums, and whatever means of dissemination were available and which money could buy. Similarly, Alpha uses video-tapes, internet websites, poster campaigns and modern music. At the same time, the Evangelical message proclaimed is always negatively critical of the spirit of the age. It may therefore be significant that Alpha has arisen in the midst of what is sometimes named as a ‘postmodern’ age. It is suggested below that Alpha may be one response to postmodernism. Martyn Percy, Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute and a lecturer at the University of Manchester, believes that revivalism in general, and Charismatic revivalism in particular can flourish in a postmodern context because there is little theological baggage to carry, and a great deal to experience. This tends to lead to schism, but there is also much excitement to be had and a ‘lightness of being’:

Despite the colourful, and at times complex world Charismatics live in, there is not much to actually learn. But there is plenty to experience. To be Charismatic is to belong to a Charismatically led church, where the gifts (or charisms) of the Spirit are known and deployed. Revivalism offers healing and a sense of personal
renewal to believers. Its theodicy can be dramatically dualist: Jesus versus the devil, Christians and angels versus demons. The worship alternates between being dynamic and punchy, to intimate and smoochy. It is above all a questing faith, that sees itself as restoring the values of the Kingdom of God, prior to the return of Christ. (Percy, 1998, p.192).

Whether viewed as a Revival or as an Awakening then, Alpha would comprise an experience which may be exciting, or even life-changing for some, but appears to have little to do with the kind of open-ended learning experience implied in its claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.

(ii) The Postmodern Context

The concept of postmodernism is closely linked to the figure of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), a French philosopher whose central concern was the role of knowledge in contemporary society and how knowledge is legitimated. This is connected to the way we use language. Significantly, the use of language is also critical to the effectiveness of Alpha, for example in the way in which the word ‘Christian’ is used, or such phrases as ‘filled with the Spirit’ are used to portray eccentric theology as orthodoxy (see Chapter Five). But, more evidently, it may be that the certainties and security offered by Alpha courses are at least in part a response to the uncertainties and threat posed by a world outside in which there are no more metanarratives.

In The Postmodern Condition (Lyotard, 1997, Manchester University Press), Lyotard uses the word ‘postmodern’ to describe “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (p.xxiii). The word “designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts” (p.xxiii).

Lyotard defines the condition as one of “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1997, p.xxiv). There are no longer to be “preestablished rules” for the artist or the writer. Lyotard says that “most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative” (p.41). It could be that in the matter of religion, it is that “lost narrative” which Alpha seeks to rediscover and promulgate, hence the appeal to ‘basics’. Gumbel would argue that far from “losing the nostalgia for it”, many people are crying out for it.

Lyotard is particularly concerned about the relationship between knowledge and power:

Knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government. (Lyotard, 1997, p.8).
Applied to *Alpha*, this raises the question of who decides what the basics are? Who decides what is or is not orthodoxy? Who controls doctrine?

Also closely associated with postmodernism is the French philosopher, Michel Paul Foucault (1926-1984). He too saw a link between knowledge and power - particularly institutional power. He was concerned to subvert conventional assumptions about social deviants (the mentally ill, the sick, and the criminal) who, he believed, are oppressed by the approved knowledge of the period in which they live. For Foucault, like Lyotard, there are no longer metanarratives governing our lives. Paul Rabinow, in his introduction to *The Foucault Reader* (Penguin, 1987 edition), says:

> Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths....
> For Foucault, there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society.
> (Rabinow, 1987, p.4).

It is this denial of any external authority which makes postmodernism anathema to many Evangelicals. According to Michael Saward, Canon and Treasurer of St Paul’s Cathedral, and a leading Evangelical, postmodernism is:

> ...another piglet from the litter of existentialism, and the Evangelical of whatever ecclesiological persuasion will need to keep his wits about him if he is effectively to disembowel this particular runt. And disembowel it he must or it will turn and rend him, trampling all over the Lord’s vineyard and fouling its vintage.
> (Saward, in Cray et al, 1997, p.95).

Similarly, for the Charismatic Evangelical Christianity of HTB and of *Alpha*, the source of authority is God, directly revealed in the bible, and mediated by the Holy Spirit. As the principal exponent of this revelation within *Alpha*, this means that for practical purposes authority resides in Nicky Gumbel and the content of his talks. Criticism will be courteously listened to but, as Ward (1998), Percy (1997) and Ireland (2000) discovered (see Chapter Six), disregarded. By contrast, Foucault believes:

> ...that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent.
> (Foucault, quoted in Rabinow, 1987, p.6).

Through the extensive quoting of endorsements from church leaders and the use of statistics, HTB seeks to portray *Alpha* as normative. The more this is achieved, the more those who follow Foucault’s thinking would regard it with suspicion. The easy acceptance of Gumbel’s authority would be seen by Foucault (following Kant) as a sign of immaturity. People ought to be using their reason instead:
Kant indicates right away that the “way out” that characterizes Enlightenment is a process that releases us from the status of “immaturity.” And by “immaturity,” he means a certain state of our will that makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for. (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.34).

For Foucault, if power is to be wielded effectively, it has to be subtle. It has to seduce people through its attractiveness and promise of pleasure:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought up to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses. (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.61).

The power of Alpha is indeed that it is perceived by its adherents as pleasurable. This may even be its main attraction. Participants speak of the feeling of welcome and sense of belonging. It produces a type of religious faith, forms knowledge (a well-defined body of teaching and a sense of having the ‘answers’) and it has produced a substantial stock of tapes, videos and books spelling out its teaching (discourse).

Foucault is suspicious of any ‘regime of truth’ and those who control it:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.73).

Alpha ‘truth’ is becoming embedded in the church. The Guildford Cathedral bookshop, for example, now stocks in one section not only all the Alpha publications but all the books referred to by Nicky Gumbel in his talks. Despite much un-Anglican teaching (baptism is unimportant, there is no individual vocation to the priesthood, an emphasis on glossolalia and physical healing, criticism of non-Charismatic worship, easy judgements about who is a Christian and who is not, a suspicion of biblical scholarship, alternative theologies and other ways of being Christian), Gumbel and Alpha are apparently endorsed by some senior clerics, and there is a lack of any degree of public criticism.
Again, on the link between truth and power:

There is a battle “for truth,” or at least “around truth” - it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean “the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,” but rather “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true”.

(Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.74).

The “true” and “false” for Alpha are the Christian and the non-Christian, clearly defined by Alpha, and the “power attached” is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, this being available only to those whom Alpha defines as being Christian - a definition much narrower than that which other parts of the church might use.

Foucault says that ‘truth’ turns out to be a system with specific purposes:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements.

‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A “regime” of truth.

(Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.74).

Traditionally, a powerful Church has been a provider of a ‘regime’ of truth, yet is no longer able to create such a dominant discourse of meaning. In Foucault’s postmodern society, individuals have to impose their own meaning on an otherwise meaningless world. Alpha has apparently come to the rescue. For individuals who feel adrift in a sea of meaninglessness it offers a ‘system’ to be followed in detail - a new ‘regime’ of truth. It produces particular teachings (‘statements’) which are regulated (by copyright), distributed by means of tapes and literature, and circulated through courses operated by churches. Courses then feed results back to Alpha headquarters (HTB) which in turn publishes them and feeds them back to the churches which have already used the course and, through the church press and local publicity, to other churches as well, in the hope of “extension”.

The problem, says Foucault needs to be tackled radically, i.e. it is no use simply challenging the content of that which is presented as ‘truth’, but rather it is necessary to challenge the regime which produces it:

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousness - or what’s in their heads - but the
political, economic, institutional regime of the production of
truth.
(Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p.74).

Criticising the theological content of *Alpha*, though it plays some necessary part in
the present thesis, on its own is of limited use. Charismatic Evangelical theology is
commonplace and the arguments against it from those of a more liberal persuasion
are well-rehearsed. However, the *Alpha* phenomenon has given the impression that
what is on offer is not one version of Christianity, but the *only* version. It is perceived
as the Christian orthodoxy, and the diversity of belief and practice available in the
wider church, indeed even in the Church of England alone, is not presented. For a
number of reasons, some perhaps involving finance and recruitment, this view has
gone largely unchallenged within the senior ranks of the Church of England, and the
*Alpha* ‘regime’ has been allowed to become prominent. It is this domination (*Alpha*
as the ‘producer of truth’) which needs to be challenged as much as the theology
being propagated, not least because the ‘production of truth’ smacks more of
indoctrination than education.

Anthony Giddens, in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Polity, 1991), writes of the place
of “radical doubt”, uncertainty, trust and risk in late modernity. All knowledge:

...takes the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be
ture, but which are in principle always open to revision and may
have at some point to be abandoned.
(Giddens, 1991, p.3).

We are all now in a very new situation:

The ‘world’ in which we now live is in some profound respects
thus quite distinct from that inhabited by human beings in
previous periods of history. [It is] one which creates *new forms
of fragmentation and dispersal.*
(Giddens, 1991, p.5).

Late modernity produces “personal meaninglessness”. This is:

...a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses,
but which are denied answers.
(Giddens, 1991, p.9).

But, as Giddens points out, despite the predictions of social theorists like Marx,
Durkheim and Weber, religion survives, and indeed, *new forms are appearing*:

New forms of religion and spirituality represent in a most basic
sense, a return of the repressed, since they directly address issues
of the moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve.
(Giddens, 1991, p.207).

*Alpha* attempts to respond to this meaninglessness, as is evident in its slogan: *An Opportunity to Explore the Meaning of Life*, though this thesis suggests that its actual function may be rather different.

One such function of *Alpha* appears to be therapeutic. Hunt (see Chapter Six) discovered clergy who saw people using *Alpha* in this way. It provides a warm, welcoming environment, with food and attention, and an authoritative belief system which seems coherent and which negates the need for too much self-examination or independent critical thought. Giddens points out:

> Formerly if people were miserable, they sought the solace of the church; now they turn to the nearest available therapist. Therapy.....dispenses with the great riddles of life in exchange for a modest and durable sense of well-being.

(Giddens, 1991, p.179).

Giddens does point out that therapy does not replicate the ‘authority’ which people relied on in the past, and there is an infinite variety of therapies for people to choose from. Perhaps the popularity of *Alpha* is in part due to its combining both religious authority and therapy: a ‘therapeutic church’.

Giddens suggests the way he believes religion has operated in the past, and indeed continues to operate:

> Religious authorities in particular quite often cultivated the feeling that individuals were surrounded by threats and dangers - since only the religious official was in a position to be able either to understand or to seek successfully to control these. Religious authority created mysteries while simultaneously claiming to have privileged access to them.


This is something of a generalisation, and more liberal or radical religious opinion would claim to be less authoritarian than this portrayal. However, within Charismatic Christianity privileged access to mysteries (as in the invoking of the Holy Spirit to come upon particular people at a particular moment) does feature.

The detailed package of teaching contained in the series of lengthy talks given by Nicky Gumbel (see Chapter Five), which the successful *Alpha* graduate is obliged to accept, does point to its appeal to the type of individual which Giddens describes:

> Some individuals find it psychologically difficult or impossible to accept the existence of diverse, mutually conflicting
Authorities. They find that the freedom to choose is a burden and they seek solace in more overarching systems of authority. A predilection for dogmatic authoritarianism is the pathological tendency at this pole. A person in this situation is not necessarily a traditionalist, but essentially gives up faculties of critical judgement in exchange for the convictions supplied by an authority whose rules and provisions cover most aspects of his life.

(Giddens, 1991, p.196).

Alpha does this. It gives the individual a coherent theology and a detailed moral code, all derived from Nicky Gumbel’s interpretation of scripture. Thus the Alpha graduate is confident he is living according to the principles of the bible and therefore in accordance with the will of God. Critical judgement is no longer required.

Giddens, however, says that this has little to do with faith or trust, and far more to do with submission:

Taking refuge in a dominant authority is essentially an act of submission. The individual, as it were, no longer needs to engage in the problematic gamble which all trust relations presume. Instead, he or she identifies with a dominant authority on the basis of projection. The psychology of leadership plays an important role here. Submission to authority normally takes the form of a slavish adherence to an authority figure, taken to be all-knowing.

(Giddens, 1991, p.196).

Ulrich Beck, in his Risk Society (Sage, London, 1992), also sees a rise in the importance of particular forms of religious belief, as the authority of scientific statements is increasingly questioned:

The production (or mobilization) of belief becomes a central source for the social enforcement of validity claims.

(Beck, 1992, p.189).

Beck talks about the importance of presentation, personal persuasive power, contacts and access to media. All of these are key aspects of Alpha promotion.

The Evangelical theology underlying Alpha is characteristically individualistic. A personal act of conversion is required (e.g., asking the Lord Jesus Christ into one’s heart). Simply being part of a Christian family or a Christian community is not enough. There has to be a moment of personal commitment when one moves from not being a Christian to being one. However, in his discussion of individualization, Beck makes the point that:
...the very same media which bring about an individualization also bring about a standardization (Beck, 1992, p.130).

He says that this applies to:

...the market, money, law, mobility, education and so on, each in its own way (Beck, 1992, p.130).

In the present context it could be added that although Alpha requires individual conversion and a personal experience of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless there has to be acceptance of the ‘basics’ of Christianity as defined by the authors of Alpha.

In the social sphere, Beck says that “liberated individuals become dependent on the labour market” and “This all points to the institution-dependent control structure of individual situations” (Beck, 1992, p.130). Similarly again, though the conversion process for Alpha is based on the will of the individual, acceptance into the Alpha community is contingent on ‘right’ belief. Certain basic doctrines are non-negotiable.

Beck sees all-embracing market-dependency:

Individualization means market dependency in all dimensions of living. The forms of existence that arise are the isolated mass market, not conscious of itself, and mass consumption of generically designed housing, furnishings, articles of daily use, as well as opinions, habits, attitudes and lifestyles launched and adopted through the mass media. (Beck, 1992, p.132).

'Generically designed religion' could be added to this list. Alpha makes use of modern marketing techniques (posters, TV, videos, tapes, books, press-launches, etc.) to provide a package. Each individual does have the freedom to choose, but what is on offer is standardized.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his Postmodern Ethics (Blackwell, 1993), sees us all, in the postmodern world, “swimming in the sea of uncertainty” (Bauman, 1993, p.222). He also uses the analogy of “vagabond” and “tourist”. The postmodern vagabond wanders without real purpose, disillusioned with the past and hopeful of the future, but not knowing where he is going or how long he is likely to stay. He “journeys through unstructured space; like a wanderer in the desert” (Bauman, 1993, p.241). By contrast, there is the postmodern tourist. He also knows that he will not stay long in one place, but he has paid and therefore has a right to demand and to change things. Of the two, Alpha could be seen as providing a destination for the wandering ‘vagabond’ (see Chapter Four), but it might only be a matter of time before the ‘tourist’ discovers that his ‘freedom’ is also unsatisfying, and he too seeks the security of Alpha.
While Evangelicalism seeks to provide a remedy for what it perceives as the dangerous relativism of postmodernism by re-establishing traditional sources of authority, this particular brand of Christianity is not alone in having reservations about the supposed freedoms which postmodernity brings. David Cheetham, writing in *Theology* (Vol. CIII, No. 811, Jan/Feb 2000) begins by quoting Don Cupitt, a prominent non-realist theologian, celebrating "the realization of total autonomy from foundational metaphysics and assumptions" (Cheetham, 2000, p.29):

The world is only an endlessly shifting purely contingent order of signs of motion, a Sea of Meanings [...]. And just the ability to see this and say it is precisely what gives us our new and joyful freedom [...]. Your God is only your faith in him, your values are only your commitment to them. That is liberation. You're free. (Cupitt, quoted in Cheetham, 2000, p.29).

But Cheetham goes on to argue that postmodern freedom is of a lesser quality than the kind of freedom that religious people (including theologians) have. He quotes June O’Connor:

Non-realism offers a profound pessimism in so far as we alone and this life alone, constitute the resources for our own fulfilment and transformation. (O’Connor, quoted in Cheetham, 2000, p.32).

And Umberto Eco:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly,’ because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly’ (Eco, quoted in Cheetham, 2000, p.33).

Cheetham compares this to a Christian saying: “As Christians might say, Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Cheetham, 2000). What is lacking is passion and commitment. By adopting this laidback indifference, the lover (or the Christian) renders himself invulnerable, and postmodern irony becomes an analgesic, offering a safe but featureless landscape. Postmodern autonomy will only lead to disappointment because “there is nothing ‘real’ to be encountered or grasped” (Cheetham, 2000, p.34). Hence:

I do not adjust myself to a perceived objectivity, but drift autonomously in and out of self-constructed legitimations much as one might sleep with many partners - none of them serious, risky or ‘committed’. In contrast, perhaps it is knowing that we
can ‘get things wrong’ that renders real encounters with Truth (with a capital ‘T’) all the more valuable and sought after. (Cheetham, 2000, p.34).

More liberal Christian theologians, however (not just non-realists like Cupitt) welcome the opportunities for theological reflection which postmodern thinking brings. One such is Graham Ward, Dean of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, who wrote on ‘Theology and Modernism’ in *Theology* (Vol C, No.798, pp.435-440):

Postmodern thinking has created this new space for theological reflection by paying attention to certain limits of or foreclosures in philosophical systems. (Ward, 1997a, p.435).

The theological horizon opened by postmodernism’s concern with a fissured self, a self which does not have control or autonomy, focuses upon the question of transcending otherness which Levinas is quite happy to call God and Irigaray quite content to call divine. (Ward, 1997a, p.438).

More generally......by their critique of Enlightenment rationalism, post-modern thinkers allow us to recognize the viability of alternative rationalities, of which theological thinking is one. (Ward, 1997a, p.439).

Ward expands his view further in *The Postmodern God* (Blackwell, 1997). For example:

I wish to argue that with postmodernism God emerges from the white-out nihilism of modern atheism and from behind the patriarchal masks imposed by modernity’s secular theology. The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking - thinking about other, alternative worlds. In the postmodern cultural climate, the theological voice can once more be heard. (Ward 1997b, p.xxi).

John Gladwin, the Bishop of Guildford, seeks neither to escape from nor advocate postmodernism. He simply recognises its reality and seeks out whatever opportunities it might offer to those trying to live out a Christian faith. In his book, *Love and Liberty* (DLT, 1998), he attempts to

...think anew about God. Then to allow that meditation to interplay with the cultural shifts of a postmodern world. (Gladwin, 1998, p.vii).
Christians must resist the temptation to allow fear to drive them backwards, but rather engage in the risky business of making sense of their lives in a new context. They should accept postmodernism’s rejection of the failures of modernism and rejoice in the acceptance of the diversity of life, and engage with it. Gladwin recognises our desire for a sense of community and our wish for peace and freedom, but believes that modernism has failed to deliver:

Whilst the abandonment of a desire for shared convictions and values may be the least desirable aspect of postmodern culture, its rejection of the unsuccessful uniformity of progressive modernism strikes chords with reality.

There must be no retreat into authoritarian forms of religion:

Postmodernism will not let us off the hook by allowing an easy route back into universals and imposed absolutes.
(Gladwin, 1998, p.3).

Whilst not explicitly stated, this must question the kind of external-authority driven theologies underpinning, for example, Alpha within the Evangelical constituency as well as AD TUENDAM FIDEM (1998) within Roman Catholicism.

Gladwin believes it is the role of faith to keep hope alive “across the diversity of a changing and often confusing world” (Gladwin, 1998, p.19), and it is the love of God which “creates, sustains, redeems and liberates” (Gladwin, 1998, p.26), and love gives space for diversity to flourish. There must be a commitment to ‘open’ (rather than imposed) truth. Gladwin then follows through the implications of this when the church speaks on issues such as family structures and sexuality. It must take a holistic approach, rooted “in the totality of our human endeavour” (Gladwin, 1998, p.149).

This is clearly in contrast to the approach to such issues taken by Nicky Gumbel and the teachings of the Alpha course, where they are settled by a direct appeal to biblical texts (see for example, Gumbel, 1994b, chapter 3 on sex before marriage, and chapter 5 on homosexuality).

Though not specifically named, Gladwin is clearly concerned about the kind of response to pluralism to be found in churches like HTB:

Some congregations have gone down the road of popularising the core faith of the Church in their worshipping and teaching ministry. Simple services in easy language with popular styles of presentation have been widely used in recent times especially but not exclusively in Evangelical and Charismatic Churches.
He sees a danger of reductionism, and an abandonment of any real concern with truth in favour of popularity:

The Charismatic search for easy common worship and faith could collapse into a minimalist and reductionist creed. The mystery and openness of truth is lost in simplistic credal demands. It hopes a concentration on fundamentals will help get people to cross the bridge. In that there is some success. But then there is real difficulty moving on. Words cannot move on to truth.


Alpha appears to be successful in getting some people to ‘cross the bridge’, but ‘moving people on’ to anything other than another similar course seems not to play a part in this kind of evangelism. Gladwin is worried about this whole trend towards separatism in church life:

[The Church] has both to resist the route which would shut its doors to any face of contemporary culture or shut itself off from the world it was seeking to evangelize by trying to create an alternative culture.


For Gladwin, faith has to be integrated with contemporary living. He has a clear vision of the form of Church he wants to see in a postmodern world:

The form of Church will focus on core faith, on minimum essential order, on people and their gifts, on flexible patterns of life held together in communion and on a shared sense of community.


In this church, people will not be told how they ought to live. Rather:

We will be saying, this is the vision that leads us on, these are the values which make sense of it, what are the choices that confront you and how can we help you decide?


Gladwin’s vision of how the church might respond to the challenges of postmodernism is in stark contrast to how Lieven Boeve sees it actually responding at present. Writing in Theology, Professor Boeve, of the Department of Theology in the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, sees the church “disputing the primacy of arbitrariness” (Boeve, 1999, p.33) which ensues from postmodern culture, with which it refuses to engage:
As a remedy against such cultural decay, they pose their own traditional truths and moral codes, and reject the dialogue with the present-day culture as impossible. Only a withdrawal from today’s culture is thought to be suitable. In order to defend their truths and moral codes against the primacy of arbitrariness, religious authorities often appeal to their own authority, or to the authority of their tradition, especially since these can no longer be made culturally plausible. Church communities stand all the more in direct opposition to the postmodern culture of pluralization and relativism. (Boeve, 1999, p.33).

Boeve is clear that the church must not cut itself off from dialogue with postmodern culture. Pluralization and relativism contain a potential for liberation. Like Gladwin, Boeve wants the churches to remember that truth is not something that can be controlled. Boeve too speaks of ‘openness’, and believes that Christianity has within it the possibility to respond constructively to the challenges of the new culture:

Christian narratives, even if they are more than once tempted to claim absolute truth, are perhaps in their nature open narratives at best. As much as God lets Godself be known in history, God does not let Godself be enclosed in it. A careful dialogue with postmodern cultural sensibility can thereby teach Christians to open up the space again in their own narratives for the God who is always greater. (Boeve, 1999, p.35).

It was suggested above that Evangelicals on the whole, as epitomized by Michael Saward, want nothing to do with postmodern thinking. There are some, however, who are making a different response. Dave Tomlinson, a former house-church leader and itinerant preacher, wrote The Post-Evangelical (Triangle, 1995) aimed at disaffected Evangelicals trying to interpret their faith intelligently in a postmodern context and resist the temptation to retreat into a theological ghetto. Some Evangelicals of this disposition describe themselves as ‘open Evangelical’ which Martyn Percy defines as:

Although evangelical in core matters of doctrine, morality and spirituality, they are nonetheless open to or aware of the insights of others. The model is one of accommodation. (Percy, 1998, p.210).

Percy then points out the difficulties they face over issues like homosexuality or the ordination of women, having to risk being labelled by more hard-line Evangelicals as ‘liberal’. Nevertheless, it is an attempt to maintain a credible Evangelical stance in a postmodern world, rather than just retreat from it.

Further, Percy has pointed out that some Charismatic Evangelicals have positively benefited from recent cultural shifts, propagating a gospel of health, wealth and
prosperity, and leaving behind holiness and sacrifice. Percy sees Alpha as utilizing this consumer culture, but the resulting converts are not deeply embedded enough in the church and are therefore unlikely to survive in the long-term:

At present, Alpha courses and similar programmes appear to be re-invigorating many churches. Yet courses like these all too frequently fail to transform any new converts into actual church members. They tend to excite the existing church membership, but little more. The likely long-term influence of such courses has been greatly overestimated. A focus on basic belief may be a helpful apologetic task for some, but it does not introduce people to the Church. This sort of evangelism is the Gospel unearthed: slickly sold as a consumer item, but more often than not failing to relate the life of the body of Christ to any specific social or local context. Sound ecclesiology cannot be manufactured out of elementary missiology.


There is also the problem that all Evangelicals ultimately face within postmodernism, namely that of revealed ‘truth’:

How can a philosophy that denies absolute and universal truth be meaningfully reconciled with a religion that really begins by asserting the very opposite?


Percy, then, recognises the popularity of Charismatic revivalism in the current postmodern climate but has doubts about its long-term survival:

For a Western world that is increasingly privatized and individualistic, a postmodern enthusiastically driven religion may be the one that proves to be the most popular in the next millennium: yet that is no guarantee of ultimate longevity. Experiential-revivalist religion is fashion-conscious, a populist, culturally relative and relevant phenomenon.


If, however, it is characteristic of this kind of revivalist religion to utilize fashion, it may well be able to adapt itself, chameleon-like, to any future cultural shifts, as it has done in the past. Gumbel would certainly claim that the essence of the Gospel message remains the same, it is only the cultural packaging which must change. He himself is very well aware of cultural context, describing how older people, more influenced by modernism, tend to find the talks about the evidence for Jesus more appealing, while the postmodernist generation, who might be more familiar with the New Age movement, tend to enjoy the direct supernatural experience of the Holy Spirit Weekend. Gumbel knows how controversial the Alpha teaching about the Holy Spirit is amongst the mainstream churches, with its emphasis on speaking in tongues,
because it is the most common criticism levelled against him, but he also knows how popular it is amongst individuals who are attracted to Alpha in the present cultural context, and that is his greater concern.

(iii) The Consumerist Context

It is possible to dismiss Alpha as part of a consumer culture, relying on the consumption of videos, simple booklets and comforting religion with an undemanding message to complement a modern affluent lifestyle. Mike Featherstone, in his Consumer Culture and Postmodernism (Sage, London, 1991), sees religion becoming a commodity to be purchased in the market-place, like any other, and ponders the implications:

If the tendency in modern Western societies is for religion to become a private leisure-time pursuit purchased in the market like any other consumer culture lifestyle, then we need to ask a number of questions about the effect of this shift on religion. Has this brought religion close to other consumer commodities and experiences, does it have to present itself as a way of life and meaning complex which offer similar kinds of emotional refreshment to other leisure pursuits? (Featherstone, 1991, p.112).

Alpha appears to have accomplished this quite effectively for some people, particularly in competition with other forms of Christian belief and practice dismissed as “liberal”, or “dusty” (Gumbel, Alpha audio-cassettes, 1993).

Featherstone sees consumer culture as being characteristic of both modern and postmodern culture (see Featherstone, 1991, p.112) and raises questions about the relationship between religion and consumer culture in both. Interestingly, given the criticisms made above, and writing before the rise of Alpha, he suggests that there is a relationship between people’s choice of religion and their choice of lifestyle:

How does the ‘choice’ of particular types of religious and quasi-religious meaning complexes relate to other cultural tastes and lifestyle pursuits which can be mapped onto the universe of tastes and lifestyles which operate with a specific society? (Featherstone, 1991, p.112).

Similarly, on the subject of ‘fashion’ Featherstone quotes Georg Simmel:

Firstly he [Georg Simmel (1978)] regards fashion as most closely associated with a particular social stratum, the middle classes, and a specific location, the metropolis (Featherstone, 1991, p.116).
Holy Trinity Brompton, the home of *Alpha*, is sometimes described as a ‘fashionable’ church, set in the ‘metropolis’ of London, and Bryan Appleyard, a journalist, noted of one young HTB worshipper:

The shoes could be by Jimmy Choo or Manolo Blahnik - pricey either way. The tight, slinky summer clothes could have come from any of the shops in the Golden triangle of SW1 - Joseph, Armani, Gucci, whatever. The blonde hair could be Toni and Guy. This, triumphantly, is a material girl, living happily in a material world.

Except that she isn’t. She’s finding God. And she’s finding Him where she found her clothes - in Knightsbridge. (Appleyard, 2001).

Featherstone argues that the expansion of the consumer culture and the materialism of which it is a part has not led to the disappearance of the sacred but merely meant a change in the way the sacred is expressed, not perhaps so much through institutionalised religion as through newly generated sacred symbols, “be it the ceremonies of the state, rock concerts or the little sacred rituals which convey solidarity in small groups, or between friends and lovers” (Featherstone, 1991, p.122). Perhaps, though, Featherstone has underestimated the extent to which organised religion (such as *Alpha*) has been able to adapt itself to the prevailing culture while still being critical of it, thus enabling its adherents to have the best of both worlds.

Jean Baudrillard (1970), by contrast, does not see symbols of the sacred in consumerism. The transcendent has disappeared:

There is no transcendence any more, no finality, no objective: what characterizes this society is the absence of ‘reflection’, of a perspective on itself..... In the specific mode of consumption, there is no transcendence any more. (Baudrillard, 1970, p.192).

Baudrillard says there is no longer any ‘mirror’ in which a human being can examine himself, there is simply the ‘shop-window’:

...- the site of consumption, in which the individual no longer produces his own reflection, but is absorbed in the contemplation of multiple signs/objects, is absorbed into the order of signifiers of social status, etc. He is not reflected in that order, but absorbed and abolished. (Baudrillard, 1970, p.192).

Baudrillard describes this as alienation. It may be that *Alpha* too becomes a ‘consumer good’ in the shop window and therefore does not really get to grips with alienation but simply offers yet another distraction.
However, Baudrillard is not in the business of condemning consumer culture. Indeed, those who moralize against it are simply playing their part in the myth of consumption:

Like every great myth worth its salt, the myth of ‘Consumption’ has its discourse and its anti-discourse. In other words, the elated discourse on affluence is everywhere shadowed by a morose, moralizing, ‘critical’ counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole.

The two discourses together, says Baudrillard, create the myth.

Baudrillard hints that this complementarity of apparent opposites in myth-making may have wider applications. In the present context it could be said that Alpha, though critical of materialism, is actually part of the consumer culture. Also on the theme of myth-making, Charismatic Evangelicals have a vested interest in propagating a medieval world-view of demons and devils against which they claim to do battle, because it is upon this theological thought-world that much of their own theology is constructed, particularly in relation to the Holy Spirit, miraculous healings and the like. In Alpha theology, the supernatural is a commonplace.

Coincidentally, Baudrillard uses the example of these complementary supernatural world-views to illustrate his point:

Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation.

Consumerism is also a feature of the Alpha course in a much more literal sense, i.e. in the consumption of a communal meal. This notion is examined further in Chapter Three.

(iv) The ‘Quest for Community’ Context

Once one has taken the first step, becoming part of the Alpha community may be easier than resisting.

Zygmunt Bauman (1991), writing more generally of this natural compulsion to be part of a community states that it requires “nerves of steel” to do otherwise. Membership is always attractive:

A shared idea... promises a shelter: a community, an ideological brotherhood, fraternity of fate or mission. The temptation to share is overwhelming. In the long run it is difficult to resist.
(Bauman, 1991, p.245).
He goes on to emphasise that in the postmodern world there is a “lust for community”, a “search for community” and an “invention of community” (Bauman, 1991, p.246).

The community group provides a safe place:

The ethnic group provides a refuge against a hostile, uncaring world. Community - ethnic, religious, political or otherwise - is thought of as the uncanny mixture of difference and company, as uniqueness that is not paid for with loneliness, as contingency with roots, as freedom with certainty; its image, its allure are as incongruous as that world of universal ambivalence from which - one hopes - it would provide a shelter.

(Bauman, 1991, p.246)

Those who adhere to Alpha are indeed aware that they are in a minority in the world outside, and that their beliefs are not widely accepted. Gumbel and Millar are aware of the need for any new converts to have sufficient Christian friends around them to counter the influence of non-Christians. When they are in the company of their Alpha group they are certainly offered both ‘freedom’ and certainty. ‘No pressure’ is the oft-repeated principle, though the practice may be different, as is suggested elsewhere in this study (see in particular Chapter Five). Alpha offers a shelter from the difficult questions, temptations, opposition, and perhaps even ridicule that they may face outside.

It may even be that both the Alpha convert and Nicky Gumbel have a need for each other:

The anguish of the contingent person seeking affirmation of her personal truth is aided and abetted by the anxiety of an intellectual seeking reaffirmation of her legislative rights and leadership role.


Bauman’s work on modern day ‘tribes’ may also be relevant to the functions which Alpha performs. He says that these tribes are formed, “by the multitude of individual acts of self-identification” (Bauman, 1991, p.248). An example of this on an Alpha course might be when someone prays out loud in the group for the first time, or more obviously when they give their testimony of conversion. Bauman also talks about the “fickleness” of the following and that “it dissipates as fast as it appears” (Bauman, 1991, p.248). Revival movements within Charismatic Evangelicalism often do have a limited life. A recent example would be the ‘Toronto Blessing’ (see above, and Porter and Richter, 1995). Alpha has gained enormous popularity in a short time. It remains to be seen how long it will last. More research would also be needed to determine how long Alpha converts remain committed to this version of Christianity.
Bauman also states:

Tribes exist solely by individual decisions to sport the symbolic traits of tribal allegiance. They vanish once the decisions are revoked or their determination fades out. They persevere thanks only to their continuing seductive capacity. They cannot outlive their power of attraction.


*Alpha* is keen on the ‘symbolic traits of tribal allegiance’, most obviously the *Alpha* logo, and *Alpha* converts interviewed in front of an audience/congregation at HTB, in *Alpha News* and in published collections of testimonies are always encouraged to commend *Alpha* to others. This emphasis on the promotion of *Alpha* led one broadly sympathetic prominent conservative Evangelical who had been invited to present two *Alpha* sessions at a particular church to comment in a letter to the *Church Times* that he felt he had to add certain essential elements to the course (despite HTB’s prohibition) which he felt were missing, because:

I was ordained not to promote *Alpha*, but to preach the gospel, and not just bits of it.

(Michael Saward, 1999).

*Alpha* is undoubtedly ‘seductive’, but as Bauman’s observation implies, *Alpha*, having placed so much importance on its brand name, will need to work hard to maintain its attraction if it is to survive.

Writing fifty years earlier, Erich Fromm also recognised an innate human desire to be part of a group and, indeed, an instinctive wish for submission to a leader:

Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? If there is not, how can we account for the attraction which submission to a leader has for so many today?

(Fromm, 1942, p.4).

One important element is the fact that men cannot live without some sort of co-operation with others. In any conceivable kind of culture man needs to co-operate with others if he wants to survive, whether for the purpose of defending himself against enemies or dangers of nature, or in order that he may be able to work and produce.

(Fromm, 1942, p.16).

Writing in the context of the Second World War, Fromm’s observations have a special poignancy and were indeed a matter of life and death. In the present discussion, on a very different level, not only does *Alpha* provide a source of co-operation, but also, in Nicky Gumbel, an authoritative expounder of God’s Word.
No possible interpretation other than his own is on the agenda, nor would Alpha’s adherents wish it to be. It is easier and simpler (and necessary for membership of this community) to accept what is given (“submit”) without significant questioning.

Fromm, like Gumbel, identifies the existential angst which lies behind the need to belong (though Gumbel would identify this as the need for God):

By being aware of himself as distinct from nature and other people, by being aware - even very dimly - of death, sickness, ageing, he necessarily feels his insignificance and smallness in comparison with the universe and all others who are not “he”. Unless he belonged somewhere, unless his life had some meaning and direction, he would feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance. He would not be able to relate himself to any system which would give meaning and direction to his life, he would be filled with doubt, and this doubt eventually would paralyse his ability to act - that is, to live. (Fromm, 1942, pp.16&17).

Gumbel would agree with this yearning for “meaning and direction”, and the need to belong, for some, appears to be fulfilled by Alpha. Gumbel would, of course, claim that Alpha is providing a lot more than simply a place to belong - rather that it points to Jesus Christ.

Fromm says that because of a person’s isolation in the world, he is driven by fear and overcome by doubts “concerning himself, [and] the meaning of life” (Fromm, 1942, p.221). He is paralysed and tries to escape from this “negative freedom”. He is driven into “new bondage” which “helps him to forget himself as a separate entity.”:

He finds new and fragile security at the expense of sacrificing the integrity of his individual self. He chooses to lose his self since he cannot bear to be alone. Thus freedom - as freedom from - leads into new bondage. (Fromm, 1942, pp.221).

Fromm writes with an understandable passion, given his situation, and it would be a mistake to over-apply his analysis in more peaceful times. But in our own postmodern world, it is difficult not to see elements of this retreat from the fear of isolation and bewilderment playing a part in the attraction of Alpha, with its benevolent and clear authority, warmth of welcome, undemanding belief and confident answers. Here, people need not feel isolated and their doubts can be assuaged. The price, however, is an acceptance of the whole system of belief. Once in, there is no freedom to question. The package is accepted complete or not at all.

In 1952, Solomon E Asch wrote of the psychological effects that groups can have on the individuals within them. His observations may give insights into the way in which Alpha functions:
The story of the emperor’s new clothes is one example of baseless consensus produced by the failure of each to make his proper contribution. At other times social forces violently prevent the person from giving expression to his insights and purposes. Then the individual must take measures of defense; he may struggle to assert his individuality; he may restrict himself by submitting or resigning himself; he may even make common cause with those who oppress him.


It would indeed be a courageous individual who questioned Nicky Gumbel’s interpretation of Christianity from within the Alpha culture. The videos of Gumbel teaching reveal a purely passive audience. There is no room here for question, discussion or debate in the way one might expect from any course offering an ‘exploration’. Similarly, as is described in the discussion of the Alpha material (see Chapter Five), group leaders are to ensure that, no matter what is said in the groups, the ‘right’ answer prevails in the end. “Making common cause” is apparent in the return of group members as group leaders. Once one has been converted, one has ‘bought in’ to the whole scheme and structure. To deny any part of it would be to pull the rug from under oneself.
PART TWO - THE ALPHA COURSE

To further explore the legitimacy of Alpha's claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life and the function of its teaching (both the content and the methods), this part of the thesis gives an account of the structure of the Alpha course, analyses some of the testimonies of individuals printed regularly in Alpha News, reviews the principal Alpha publications which provide support for those putting on or attending the course, and reviews four recent critiques of Alpha.

Chapter Three - The Structure of the Alpha Course

The Alpha course comprises in essence a series of fifteen talks (see Introduction) on subjects related to the Christian faith, and Holy Trinity Brompton intends that local churches should put on Alpha courses using its own (HTB's) material which may be purchased in video, audio or book form. If the latter, then a local speaker should give the talks contained in the book, remaining true to the original content. The talk: Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant, provides a link between one course and the next, being given at the celebration party at the end of the course to which participants invite new guests. In this talk, Nicky Gumbel attempts to address people's scepticism and preconceptions about Christianity by describing his own former scepticism and preconceptions. He then attempts to build an intellectual case for Christianity as the only authentic personal response to a sinful and meaningless existence. The subsequent talks deal with the life and death of Jesus, faith, the bible, prayer, the Holy Spirit, evil, evangelism, healing, the church and morality. (The content of these talks is examined in detail in Chapter Five). It is intended that each talk is held in the evening, after work, with a meal provided.

The provision of a meal clearly has a strong appeal to young people who are leading busy lives, do not have family responsibilities, for whom cooking is a chore, and who are looking for sociability. The centrality of this meal on the Alpha course merits further consideration. The creators of Alpha may be keen to avoid divisive doctrines of the eucharist (see Chapters Five and Eight), but it is hard not to see a sacramental quality in this meal which is shared together at the beginning of each course session. It is a vital part of Alpha, and indeed an 'Alpha Cookbook' has been written to support it. The meal is advertised as informal, but is nevertheless surrounded by subtle but important rules, namely that everyone is to be included, and no-one must talk about religion. It is designed to create a warm, welcoming, non-threatening sense of well-being and openness to what follows. Indeed, the receiving of a free meal may even create a sense of obligation on the part of the guests towards the providers at least to stay and listen politely. The combination of food and attention is seductive. HTB has clearly understood the link between physical and spiritual well-being. Bryan S Turner, in his The Body and Society (Sage, London, 1996) identifies this link:

The parallelism between spiritual and physical well-being is thus a common theme of the Abrahamic tradition. Contemporary sociology of religion has generally neglected this intimate
relationship between body and belief, between medicine and religion. 

It has also been observed that the whole notion of eating out together, and the kind of food which is suggested, betray *Alpha*'s middle-class appeal. The sociologist Stephen Hunt observes:

Here, *Alpha* tends to give away its cultural pretensions. More often than not the meal comes across as a middle-class dinner party and does not always appear to be a suitable setting for the presentation of the gospel. At one Baptist church I attended, the pre-*Alpha* meal was accompanied with a suitable ambience created by candlelight and waiters in smart suits akin to those in an expensive restaurant. The less cultured found themselves awkwardly searching for the 'correct' cutlery and may have wished that they had opted for the local ‘Wimpey’. 
(Hunt, 2001, pp.41&42).

Turner makes the same point about the relationship between eating and culture, more concisely:

Eating can be conceived as a fundamental ‘body technique’ 
(Mauss, 1979), that is, an activity which has a basic physiological function, but which is heavily mediated by culture. 
(Turner, 1996, p.177).

Pasi Falk, in *The Consuming Body* (Sage, London, 1994), also sees what he calls ‘the ritual meal’ as an important means by which the community is bound together. To share food is to participate in the community. He draws his observations from the practices of primitive societies:

My argument is that the interactive link which relates the subject to its environment, binding subjects to each other as a community, is primarily structured on the oral-ingestive dimension. The primitive society can hardly be reduced to a ‘communion’ or a common shared ritual meal, yet the rituals involving not only eating (meal) but also other activities concerning food, function as the integrative mechanism of the society. The primitive society is in a fundamental sense an “eating community”..... Sharing and incorporating food in a ritual meal implies the incorporation of the partaker into the community simultaneously defining his / her particular ‘place’ within it. 
(Falk, 1994, p.20).
Falk emphasises again the meal’s function of incorporating people into the community:

In a ritual meal, in which the community is both actualized and reproduced, the sharing and (bodily) incorporation of food also implies the incorporation of the partaker or member into the community. (Kilgour, 1990; Stjernfelt, 1987). That is, while eating the shared food the subject is eaten into the community (communion). (Falk, 1994, p.136).

Falk sees the vital reinforcing role that the shared meal plays in religious ceremonial:

All large ceremonials that have as one of their parts the eating of a meal, the distribution of food, or the ritual enactment of any aspect of the gathering or eating of food are reinforced in their religiousness by virtue of their association with that food-act (Falk, 1994, p.24).

Within the Alpha method this could mean that even tentative enquirers who begin an Alpha course have actually, unwittingly, joined the community as soon as they participate in the meal. They are bound to the group before a word about belief is spoken. As they come back, week by week, and eat their meals, they are drawn further and further in, despite reservations they may have about what they are being taught. To refuse the meal would seem impolite, but to accept it is to accept what lay behind it. The significance of ‘eating with’ someone is deeply embedded in religious discourse. Direct references to the eucharistic meal aside, the book of Revelation in the bible contains the verse made famous by Holman Hunt’s painting ‘The Light of The World’, but which also speaks of an intimate relationship with Jesus illustrated by a shared meal: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation, chapter 3, verse 20, New International Version).

The Alpha Administrator’s Handbook (1999) sets out the full programme for an Alpha evening. Forty minutes are allowed for the meal and then there are to be a few words of welcome, any notices, suggestions for reading (books of an Evangelical persuasion which reflect the themes of the talks), followed by ‘a joke’. There is then to be ten minutes of ‘worship’. The latter may seem rather odd, given that the course is intended for non-Christians, but perhaps is indicative of the way in which Alpha draws in those who have some previous experience of the Church. (This is examined elsewhere in this thesis - see especially Chapters Four and Eight).

This is then followed by the talk, delivered either in person or on video or audio tape. Whichever method is used, it must follow the content set out in Gumbel’s book, Questions of Life (1993). This is then followed by a break for coffee, after which all those present are divided up into small groups of about twelve people. According to the Handbook, each group should ideally contain two Leaders and two Helpers.
These Leaders and Helpers will have been carefully selected and well-trained for their tasks:

Leaders tend to be more experienced, more mature Christians. They direct the conversation but their aim is to draw conversation out of the Small Group rather than 'teach' them. The Leaders would take pastoral responsibility for the guests and Helpers in their group.

Helpers are often new Christians and may have just finished the Alpha course themselves. They are a key part of the small group as they are excited and lack church jargon with which to confuse new guests. These Helpers also play an important role in building friendships with guests and supporting the Leaders. Very often it is the Helpers who relate best to the guests.

(Handbook, p.23).

Given the intention that one-third of any group (unknown to the rest of the group) are part of the Alpha team, and therefore that at least one third of the participants on the entire course must be already committed, any enquiring newcomers might wonder just how exploratory the whole exercise is. As suggested in Chapter Eight, in practice far more even than that proportion may already be Christians. The group sessions are intended to last about forty-five minutes, and end the evening.

Absolutely central to the Alpha course is the Holy Spirit Weekend Away. This is to be held approximately two-thirds of the way through the course, at a venue away from the church, and focusses on the activity of the Holy Spirit. It features the three talks: Who is the Holy Spirit?, What Does the Holy Spirit Do?, and How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit? It is an intense course on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian according to Charismatic Evangelical teaching, and is highly experiential. Hence, during the Ministry Time there may be miraculous healing, glossolalia, and emotional expressions (weeping, shaking etc.) of encounters with the Holy Spirit. It is clearly a turning point on the course. After this point there is an assumption that one is converted. The Weekend (or in many cases 'Day') is examined further in Chapters Five and Eight. It is evident that some participants in the Weekend do have reservations about what is happening and, according to the social scientist Solomon Asch (1952), they are right to be worried. In chapter sixteen of his book, ‘Group Forces In The Modification and Distortion Of Judgements’ (Asch, 1952), Asch describes the results of an experiment which demonstrates how many people will be influenced, possibly against their better judgement, by the majority around them. Asch then looks at the wider implications:

We may first consider what the preceding observations signify for the effects that group conditions can exert on individuals in their midst. One point merits attention despite its obviousness. The distortions that we have found in action, judgement, and, to some extent, perception were a consequence of pressures from the social
sphere, not of tendencies whose source is in the individual himself. The individuals who succumbed to the majority would have acted in an entirely sensible way had they been spared the warping influence of the group. The effects we have observed had their start in a prior contamination of the social field - evidence of the profound difference, from the standpoint of the individual, between being in a group that possesses an adequate view and being in a group whose view is distorted. (Asch, 1952, p.495).

This phenomenon is consistent with the importance which HTB attaches to numbers. For Alpha recruitment to be effective, the guests have to find themselves very quickly in a context in which the ethos and expectations of Alpha are the norm. This will be the case most obviously at the Holy Spirit Weekend where guests will be in an unfamiliar but congenial environment with a detailed Alpha programme and where escape is not easy. (The same strategy to convince newcomers that Alpha is mainstream may lay behind the enormous number of endorsements by church leaders to be found in the Alpha literature).

Asch goes on to contrast the benefits of maintaining independence rather than yielding, in terms of avoiding rather than spreading error and confusion. To yield entails, for example, "suppressing evidence that cannot be assimilated" (Asch, 1952, p.497). Within Alpha this might mean avoiding the difficult questions concerning, for example, miraculous healings or other types of claimed divine intervention, and settling for explanations which, had one not become part of Alpha, one might have found inadequate.

Asch goes on to recognise that people vary enormously in their susceptibility to group pressure. This may imply that Alpha will be more effective with some people than others. It is interesting that some people appear to find Alpha immensely attractive, while others dislike it with equal vigour. Whether or not Alpha appeals to certain personality types is a subject for another study, and is beyond the scope of the present one.

Asch suggests that those who yield in a group are colluding in a process of self-deception. They have struck a bargain:

Those who yield act at times as if they had entered a compact which will guarantee them a minimum of safety at the cost of self-restriction. It is probable that self-limitation is achieved by a restriction of awareness and that the course of the process is largely unknown to its actors. (Asch, 1952, p.499).

It may be that some Alpha graduates would not wish to dwell too much on the nature or authenticity of what is happening because this may risk losing the 'safety' that is on offer; the safety here being the warmth of the new community and the assurance
that this is where the true answer to the problems and meaning of life is to be found. This absorption into the *Alpha* regime by means of the warmth of the welcome is seductive and effective. The combination of a charismatic speaker, well-trained group leaders, and a carefully planned experience of the Holy Spirit clearly exercise a powerful influence on many participants in a way which for some is hard to resist because of its benevolent stance. Steven Lukes (1974) makes the point that the exercise of power does not necessarily require conflict. *Alpha* goes out of its way to avoid conflict. Indeed, group leaders are encouraged to allow people to ask whatever questions they want to ask. The pressure to conform, as at the meals and at the Holy Spirit Weekend, is much more subtle. An individual is won over by being absorbed into the community. Gumbel initially uses humour and ‘warmth’ to draw the sting of the resistant. Then, to refuse the doctrine or resist the Holy Spirit would seem an act of disloyalty or at least ingratitude after one has been given so much food and made so welcome. The power of the group under Gumbel’s leadership is enormous, hence the emphasis on numbers of adherents, giving weight to the legitimacy of what is being offered. Lukes quotes Hannah Arendt on this notion of group power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. 

(Lukes, 1974, p.28).

The group ‘keeping together’ is dependent on the maintenance of a strong group identity and focus of allegiance, hence the need to keep the name of ‘*Alpha*’ firmly to the forefront. It is now that brand name which unites its followers who in turn give authority to the leadership.

The function of the teaching content (including the theology) and methods of *Alpha* are examined further in the analysis of the *Alpha* literature in Chapter Five.
Chapter Four - The Alpha Testimonies

In his book, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism - A Study of Brainwashing in China (Norton, New York, 1961), R J Lifton describes the process of ‘confession’ and ‘re-education’:

Whatever its setting, thought reform consists of two basic elements: confession, the exposure and renunciation of past and present “evil”; and re-education, the re-making of a man in the Communist image. These elements are closely related and overlapping, since they both bring into play a series of pressures and appeals - intellectual, emotional, and physical - aimed at social control and individual change.

(Lifton, 1961, p.5).

And he asks:

How can we recognize parallels to thought reform within our own culture, and what can we do about them?
(Lifton, 1961, p.6).

Every edition of Alpha News (published three times a year by Holy Trinity Brompton) contains five or six ‘testimonies’ from individuals who have found the Alpha course to be a life-changing experience. Many such testimonies have also been gathered together by Mark Elsdon-Dew, a leading member of staff at Holy Trinity Brompton, in a growing number of volumes of The God Who Changes Lives (HTB, see for example, Volume Three, 2000). These testimonies with their details of ‘before’ and ‘after’ Alpha show signs of Lifton’s ‘confession’ and ‘re-education’. The Alpha graduate recounts his alienation from his family, perhaps his abuse of drugs or drink or his dabbling in the occult and his antipathy towards God and all things religious before attending an Alpha course where he becomes converted and his life is turned around and put back on track. Such testimonies also feature prominently in conferences and courses at HTB as well as in the books and videos. Alpha graduates are encouraged to speak of their conversion and the difference that Alpha has made to their lives. Once one’s personal conversion has been made public it becomes very difficult for the individual later to question it.

Lifton also observed, in relation to Chinese Communism, that one’s own individual experience (as well as historical events more widely) can be taken over and re-written to conform to the myth being propagated. It appears that there is a recognisable myth apparent in the written testimonies of conversion published in the Alpha literature. Each testimony broadly follows the following stages:

1. Some early exposure to church, usually through parents, but now spoken of disparagingly (‘It was boring’, ‘Just habit’, ‘Not really Christian’, ‘Something I was made to do’ etc.).
2. Some form of degradation (drinking, gambling, womanizing, family break-up, etc.).
3. Denial of, and hostility to religious belief.
4. Invitation to Alpha through spouse or friend.
5. Attendance at Alpha but with scepticism at first.
6. Conversion.
7. Interpretation as God’s action.
8. Improvement in life situation and commendation of Alpha to others.

This pattern was derived from an analysis of thirty-six testimonies reported in seven successive editions of Alpha News, published during the period of the present research. The testimonies appeared as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edition of Alpha News</th>
<th>Names of those who gave their testimonies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 1998</td>
<td>Anonymous teenage drugs offender, Graham Richens, Andy Green, Tilly Johnson, Ashley Meaney, Jessica Davies, Gary Sasser, Edwina Coates, Mark Beach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1999</td>
<td>Etam and Shabu Dedhar, Howard St. Clair, Bob Campbell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1999</td>
<td>Mike Norris, Ken Ashton.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2000</td>
<td>Diane Louise Jordan, Marc de Leyritz, Ben Hume-Wright, David Heaton-Ellis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2000</td>
<td>Helene Murphy, Jonathan Aitken, Billy Bell, Debbie Bell, Ann Hughes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>Karen Childs, Jamie Furney, Pam Sefton, Pete Sefton, Lindsay Ball.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of these spoke of their early experience of church, but usually in disparaging terms.

Early exposure to church - now disparaged:

For some this early exposure to church involved Sunday School, for some it involved Confirmation and for some it involved attending church, with or without parents. Parents, in these stories, were often dismissed as not being proper Christians, or creatures simply of habit without real faith.

Gary Sasser spoke of attending Sunday School, as did Debbie Bell, but the latter still claimed that “otherwise I had no Christian background”. David Kennedy attended Confirmation classes, but was “not a churchgoer.” Mike Norris was also Confirmed, at the age of thirteen, but now dismissed the experience as being purely because “two of my friends had been Confirmed and one had been given a nice bike.” Ann Hughes
had also been Confirmed, but “couldn’t say that I had a true belief.” David Heaton-Ellis also dismissed his own being Confirmed as “because everyone else was.” He similarly claimed that he only joined the choir “because they got chocolate cake once a week.” He actually spent several of his most formative years at Salisbury Cathedral School, where all of this took place, but claimed that it played no part in his Christian formation other than in a negative way. Mark Beach reported attending church, as did Shelley Nothnagel, “but never learned much there”. Howard St Clair attended church as a child, as did Etam Dedhar, but she “slipped away” in her teens. For others, like Ken Ashton, their recollection is of mere outward observance: “It was just a question of what you did on a Sunday - you dressed up smart and went.”

Similarly, for Ben Hume-Wright: “I thought that church was dull. It was just part of our Sunday routine. It didn’t seem to have anything to offer me.” For Pete Sefton also, it was “just a routine to us”. And again for David Heaton-Ellis: “I never really saw the meaning of going to church. Dad was in the army, so we all marched down to church.”

Helene Murphy was brought up in a Catholic family, and going to Mass was “one of the rules of living at home.” Jamie Furney was at pains to point out that, though he went to church with friends from school, it was “only because they were going. It didn’t mean anything to me.” For others, like Diane Jordan, it was the social attractions: “I went for three reasons: firstly so I could put on my best frock; secondly, because you would see all your friends there; and thirdly, they always had competitions and I was quite competitive.” ‘Jane’s’ parents were among those who were “not Christians” although they helped at Sunday School. Marc de Leyritz’s parents were similarly dismissed as “nominal Catholics”, and Ann Hughes claimed to know that though her parents “were God-fearing people and attended church at Christmas, weddings and funerals”, nevertheless, “God wasn’t like a permanent part of their lives.”

It appears that to speak disparagingly of one’s early exposure to the church is an unspoken requirement of those who give Alpha testimonies, thus giving greater weight both to the authenticity of one’s conversion experience and to the particular version of Christianity to which one has been converted. Other forms are dismissed as mere nominalism. This is consistent with what might be termed a ‘de-Christianizing’ process whereby one is encouraged to conclude that one was not a proper Christian before (even though the subject might have thought (s)he was at the time) but one is now, as a result of Alpha. In this case, what has happened is not evangelism in the sense of winning new people, but rather changing individuals from one form of Christianity into another. This is again consistent with Hunt’s view (Hunt, 2001) that Alpha is primarily enlarging the Charismatic Evangelical constituency within the existing church.

This disparagement of early exposure to other forms of Christianity, including one’s own time in Sunday School and sometimes Confirmation, also often appears judgemental and dismissive of the Christian faith of the subject’s parents, who are accused of being at best ‘nominal’ and at worst ‘not Christians’. One wonders about the hurt this must cause parents whose faith may actually go much deeper than they are given credit for, and who clearly believed they were giving their children a Christian start in life. The testimonies, in their pointed dismissal of early exposure to
Christianity, inevitably also give rise to a suspicion of self-deception. One wonders how formative those early experiences have really been, how much has simply lain dormant, and how much they have enabled the subject to recognise what is being offered on an *Alpha* course. These are questions which are very difficult to answer, but are critical for assessing the conversion claims of *Alpha*.

**Degradation:**

For the testimony to conversion to have power, there has to be evidence of a condition from which one was ‘saved’. The worse the degradation, the more powerful the conversion and the greater the evidence for the effectiveness of *Alpha*. Thus, most of those who gave their testimonies had tales to tell of their prior deprived or depraved state. These did vary in seriousness, from bereavement to imprisonment.

The anonymous teenager had a drugs habit; Graham Richens, Etam Shabu, Bob Campbell and Edwina Coates had marital problems, and Andy Green and Debbie Bell had bereavement problems. Ashley Meaney had a “pagan lifestyle of a new-age, crystal-wearing, male model” who enjoyed “partying quite hard, drugging quite hard, and sexing quite hard.” In fact alcohol, drugs, sex and smoking also featured to varying degrees in the testimonies of Gary Sasser, Mark Beach, David Kennedy, David Harding, Bob Campbell, Mike Norris, Ben Hume-Wright, Billy Bell and Shelley Nothnagel (who had spent time in prison). Diane Jordan described herself as formerly a “struggling actress”, and David Heaton-Ellis simply “got bored” with his life. Helene Murphy tried “Feng Shui”, and Jonathan Aitken famously spent time in prison. Karen Childs became pregnant as a teenager, experienced a stillbirth and suffered from depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Her marriage to a man twice her age broke up and she suffered a series of health problems. She claimed to have tried tarot cards, astrology and Buddhism, but her depression worsened. Jamie Furney’s father committed suicide, he did a lot of drinking, had a “homosexual lifestyle” and had “given up on life”. A subsequent relationship with a woman fell apart, he hated his job and contracted pneumonia. Lindsay Ball was sexually assaulted as a child and left home at the age of seventeen. She got married but had family and marital problems. Her mother was killed in a car crash and her father died of cancer. She married again but was injured in a car accident, left her job and had more marriage difficulties.

It is difficult to know what credence to give these stories without checking up on their authenticity. How many of them are fabricated or at least exaggerated for effect must remain unknown. Clearly the catalogue of disasters which appear to have befallen some individuals would be heart-rending if wholly true. They could be seen as examples of Zygmunt Bauman’s postmodern ‘vagabond’ (Bauman, 1993, p.241) who wanders without real purpose, disillusioned with the past and hopeful of the future, but not knowing where he is going or how long he is likely to stay. He “journeys through unstructured space; like a wanderer in the desert”. *Alpha* here provides a destination for this wandering vagabond. “Disillusion with the last place of sojourn”, as Bauman puts it, could refer to the old lifestyle. *Alpha* provides structure in contrast to the vagabond’s “unstructured space” (Bauman, 1993, p.241).
We are clearly meant to be impressed by the turnaround in these individuals’ lives and implicitly by the course which has produced such an effect. We might equally conclude that Alpha is most effective for vulnerable or perhaps inadequate people. We also do not know how long whatever it was they found on the Alpha course which helped them will last, or how permanent the change will be. The caring community they found on Alpha was clearly of benefit but the issue of strings being attached to the care being offered is also relevant (see Chapter Eight). To continue to enjoy the support of the Alpha community one would have to accept the theological framework which goes with it. It is also possible that these stories are included in Alpha News because they are the exception rather than the rule. Certainly in all the interviews I conducted I did not come across anyone who gave any indication that they had had these kind of extreme experiences prior to completing an Alpha course.

The recounting of these periods of degradation may reflect what V W Turner describes as “status reversal” (see Turner, V W, The Ritual Process, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). Here, an elevation in status is preceded by a temporary period of degradation. Within Alpha, this period is recounted rather than acted out. Turner says: “The ritual, in fact, has the long-term effect of emphasizing all the more trenchantly the social definitions of the group” (Turner, 1969, p.171). For Alpha members, the depth of the previous degradation of the convert (even for those who didn’t experience anything very similar) serves to reinforce for them the truth and power of the new society which they have entered.

As described above, the detailing of one’s previous sinful lifestyle could be seen as a form of public confession, and Lifton certainly saw this as an important part of the brainwashing technique used in Communist China:

Closely related to the demand for absolute purity is an obsession with personal confession... It is an act of symbolic self-surrender, the expression of the merging of individual and environment... It is a means of maintaining an ethos of total exposure - a policy of making public (or at least known to the Organization) everything possible about the life experiences, thoughts, and passions of each individual, and especially those elements which might be regarded as derogatory.... The assumption underlying total exposure (besides those which relate to the demand for purity) is the environment’s claim to total ownership of each individual self within it. (Lifton, 1961, p.425).

Confession can be psychologically therapeutic, according to Lifton:

The cult of confession can offer the individual person meaningful psychological satisfactions in the continuing opportunity for emotional catharsis and for relief of suppressed guilt feelings, especially insofar as these are associated with self-punitive
tendencies to get pleasure from personal degradation. More than this, the sharing of confession enthusiasms can create an orgiastic sense of "oneness," of the most intense intimacy with fellow confessors and of the dissolution of self into the great flow of the Movement.  
(Lifton, 1961, p.426).

People speak of the sense of welcome and warmth they experience at Alpha courses. The sharing of personal testimonies and the sense of being part of something inspires great loyalty to the group and to the whole enterprise. They are able to unload their guilt in exchange for a sense of belonging. This may be far more important than the actual teaching which the subject is happy to accept as part of the package.

Lifton writes of the appeal of what he terms 'the totalist sacred science':

At the level of the individual, the totalist sacred science can offer much comfort and security. Its appeal lies in its seeming unification of the mystical and the logical modes of experience (in psychoanalytic terms, of the primary and secondary thought processes).  
(Lifton, 1961, p.428).

Alpha claims to unite the "mystical" (Holy Spirit) and the "logical" (teaching) modes. Indeed, Gumbel talks about different parts of the course appealing to Enlightenment thinkers and New Age thinkers. The local Alpha community certainly offers "comfort and security" to those who accept its teaching and methods. But there is a price to be paid. Lifton acknowledge that ideological totalism may offer someone "an intense peak experience" but it is based on:

...a retreat into doctrinal and organizational exclusiveness, and into all-or-nothing emotional patterns more characteristic of the child than of the individuated adult.  
(Lifton, 1961, p.435).

HTB certainly sees Alpha as the means of propagating authentic Christianity rather than one version of it. It may be an exaggeration to say that Alpha is an example of a totalist environment, but Alpha may be an example which illustrates Lifton's claim:

No milieu ever achieves complete totalism, and many relatively moderate environments show some signs of it.  
(Lifton, 1961, p.435).

Denial of, and hostility to religious belief:

Again, the power and effect of one's conversion and thus of Alpha can be measured by the degree of hostility the subject previously felt towards anything to do with Christianity, and in particular towards the Church. The greater the hostility, the more
remarkable the conversion. The degree of hostility, however, varied. Jamie Furney, for example, didn’t go to church “except at Christmas and Easter”, or in the case of David Heaton-Ellis, “apart from Midnight Mass once a year”, and Karen Childs’ early experience of church led her to conclude: “if that’s Christianity then that’s not what I’m looking for.” Pam Sefton had decided that “God never listens to us. He never answers our prayers”. Lindsay Ball pointed out that “we weren’t churchgoers at all”, and Helen Murphy, as a student, “sounded off with a complete tirade of how Christianity wasn’t at all relevant to how life is today.” Ann Hughes simply recollected that she “wasn’t a Christian”, while Diane Jordan “turned away quite ferociously” and thought that “if you were a Christian you couldn’t have a brain because there was no way that an intelligent person could believe in something they couldn’t see.” Mike Norris “thought Jesus was just a fairy tale”, and became angry with God when his father died, while Graham Richens was simply “anti-religious and Andy Green a “confirmed atheist”. There is of course early precedent for hostility towards Christianity prior to conversion, most notably in the case of St Paul: “I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, chapter one, verse thirteen, Revised Standard Version of the bible). His prior hostility to the emerging church and the drama of his conversion experience were often used by the New Testament writers, Luke and himself, to impress their readership and thus win new converts (see Acts 7:58; 8:1,3; 9:1,3-22; 22:4-19; 26:9-15; 1Cor 9:11; 15:8; Gal 1:13).

Invitation to Alpha, through spouse or friend:

There was usually a key person through whom the invitation came. Typical were Shabu Dedhar, Pete Sefton, Lindsay Ball and Ken Ashton, who were invited by their wives, and Howard St Clair, Helen Murphy, Pam Sefton and Billy and Debbie Bell who were told about it by friends. Bob Campbell was invited by his son who had “found Jesus Christ”, Mike Norris by his girlfriend, Ben Hume-Wright by his sister, and David Heaton-Ellis by his brother. Diane Jordan and Marc de Leyritz were invited by work colleagues, and Jamie Furney by a bishop whom he had heard at a meeting. Less common (e.g. Ann Hughes) were those who had seen it advertised. The invitation often seemed to come when the subject was at his or her lowest ebb, during the period of ‘degradation’.

Attendance at Alpha but with scepticism at first:

The effectiveness of Alpha is re-emphasised by noting the scepticism of those attending Alpha for the first time. They appear to be occupying a liminal state, being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Alpha at the same time. Examples would be Diane Jordan and Mike Norris, who said they feared brainwashing and (in the case of Mike Norris) that the food might be drugged. David Harding claimed to have gone just “to try and make a few friends”, while Etam Dedhar wanted “proof” (subsequently given when her husband’s neck pain was cured). Marc de Leyritz was “irritated by Nicky’s talk on speaking in tongues” (but later spoke in tongues himself), and Ben Hume-Wright considered on the first night “ducking out before I get sucked in”. He “didn’t expect the others there to be my kind of people - I thought they’d be studious, square - a bit
nerdy". David Heaton-Ellis claimed that he was "not looking forward to it" and "was expecting 'happy clappy' sort of people." Helene Murphy and Karen Childs also feared "tambourines". Jonathan Aitken said it was "against all my instincts... not my scene at all", and Ann Hughes "hadn't really expected to be sustained and fed."

Conversion:

This was the key point of the testimonies, without which they would not have been included. A moment of conversion which one can graphically describe is clearly expected and apparently almost required if one is to continue within the Alpha regime. Graham Richens spoke of a "void becoming filled, contentment, fulfilment" when he "became a Christian". For Andy Green it involved "floods of tears", as it did for Helene Murphy, Mike Norris, Karen Childs, Lindsay Ball and Ashley Meaney, who broke down and wept and was "filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and love". Jamie Furney also cried and had a vision of Jesus "right in front of my face". Jonathan Aitken also wept and described how, at the Holy Spirit Weekend: "My palms suddenly began to tingle with a strange physical sensation which strengthened until my hands and wrists became hot and uncomfortable, as though they were being charged with an electric current." Jane also cried and "felt intensely warm". Gary Sasser was equally ecstatic: "I have got higher on the Holy Spirit than ever I have been on heroin, speed, alcohol or anything - and all without a hangover!" Howard St Clair made a similar comparison: "I’ve experienced drink and drugs and, I tell you, you cannot buy the buzz you get from knowing the Holy Spirit is with you." Mark Beach spoke of a "tingle" and then "waves of power". David Kennedy felt "enveloped by a feeling of love" Shabu Dedhar "went up" and "gave his life to Jesus", as did Bob Campbell. For some, it was a less dramatic experience. Diane Jordan, for example, said "God sort of crept up on me", and Ben Hume-Wright began "to find it all very relevant". Ann Hughes "started recognising that I felt different", while Debbie Bell got a picture in her head of Jesus baptising people and "I wanted to be one of those people." Pam Sefton’s experience appears to support the view that Alpha’s conversion is simply from one form of Christianity to another: "I was so excited that Jesus was in my life. My only frustration was the thought that I’d been going to church all those years and I’d missed all this. I could have known about Jesus thirty years ago if I’d been told about him.” These transitional stages appear to reflect the "special acts" described by Arnold van Gennep in his The Rites of Passage (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977 (originally published 1960)) which mark transitions from one stage or group to another. In Alpha, as within Evangelicalism generally, emphasis is placed on this act of giving one’s testimony of conversion to mark publicly one’s entry in the community of the faithful.

Interpretation as God’s action:

Following the conversion experience, the subject then often reinterprets his or her experience in the light of the new understanding of Christian belief adopted. It is all now understood as being part of God’s plan. The process of ritualization into a new status is complete. Diane Jordan, for example, noticed that "God had been clearing away all the clutter" and Marc de Leyritz said, "As I spoke, St Paul’s words from the
bible came to me.” Ben Hume-Wright “realised God was saying, ‘You don’t do drugs anymore’. God just clicks his fingers and its done.” David Heaton-Ellis, after being “totally overcome by something” wasn’t sure at first what it was, “but obviously it was the Holy Spirit”. Since then he has felt he has “a relationship with God which I never had before.” Jonathan Aitken was also convinced that he had received “a genuine manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This radical change in perspective does bear some similarity to the transformation which the educationalist J. Mezirow sees as the hallmark of adult learning:

Transformative learning involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old in favour of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based upon the new perspective, and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one’s life. (Mezirow, 1991, p.161).

In these terms then, conversion could be seen as a form of “transformative learning”. However, whereas Mezirow sees “perspective transformation” as a wholly benevolent operation bringing about “an empowered sense of self” when occurring within the sphere of adult education as commonly understood, within the sphere of the Alpha pattern of conversion it appears to lead primarily to conformity to an expected norm of behaviour and lifestyle, as described below.

**Improvement in life situation and commendation of Alpha to others:**

There is always a happy ending to the testimonies given which must be required if they are successfully to promote Alpha. Nobody has anything negative to say about their experience of Alpha, nor is it seen to have had anything less than a significant effect on their lifestyle and outlook. Certainly none of them dropped out of Alpha (for good).

As a result of Alpha, Ashley Meaney left the fashion industry in which he was working, then converted and married his girlfriend who subsequently became pregnant. His mum and dad also “became Christians”. He went on to work with AIDS victims. Jessica Davies also became involved in charity work, while Edwina Coates did a follow-up course. Mike Norris, Bob Campbell and David Kennedy gave up drinking and David and his family became regular churchgoers, as did ‘Jane’, while Bob “mellowed”, and Mike also gave up smoking. Shelley Nothnagel was cured of her addiction to alcohol and drugs. Billy and Debbie Bell’s marriage “began to mend big time”, while Etam Dedhar’s also “improved” and “felt secure” and she and her husband were going to renew their marriage vows in church. To them it was “like a fairytale”. She also “stayed in” instead of going out to clubs. Howard St. Clair had been unfaithful to his wife but “came clean” and wanted to make up. He believed: “The more I try to be like Jesus the better our relationship will be. I am his puppet
and I’ll do whatever he wants me to do.” He hoped his wife (who did not share his new found faith) would come to believe that he really had changed. One can’t help wondering, however, how this looked from his wife’s perspective. Improvement in one’s marriage as a result of Alpha was a recurring theme. Pam Sefton spoke for many: “Before we both became Christians, we were married but we were like two single people being married. When God came into our lives he gave us a marriage. Our house is just full of God now. I just wish that you could put a video in the video machine which would give you the feeling of what you feel when you’ve done an Alpha course.” She also illustrated the dependence which Alpha can create: “I could do an Alpha course all the time. I just love it.” She has clearly found something more than just a course in Christian basics. Her husband, Pete, after Alpha, would say “Sorry, Lord” every time he swore, and found that his two “lost sons” got back in touch. He also now “mixes with people” more. Ken Ashton agonized over whether to declare all his earnings to the tax-man and decided he should. David Heaton-Ellis was less specific: “I realise that the way I’ve been living life has been pretty shallow but now things are different. I now have a different perception of life.” Helen Murphy “felt differently about Feng Shui”, while Billy Bell found he “rarely got angry” and lost two stone because “I’ve virtually stopped drinking”.

More modestly, Ann Hughes, a headteacher, found that “school assemblies now have a different resonance for me.” Karen Childs “just felt complete relief” as “the pain of my daughter’s death has now gone”. Jamie Furney also reported an improved sense of well-being, and articulated well the state of euphoria others hinted at: “When I got home I instantaneously knew that the way I’d been living my life was wrong. I wanted no part of it anymore. I couldn’t do it. The clouds look whiter; the grass looks greener, jokes are funnier, food tastes better, everything in life is better.”

For many of these individuals Alpha has clearly performed a therapeutic function, making them more at ease with themselves and with life in general. For some it has been almost a rite of passage, taking them from a rebellious youth or a deviant lifestyle, to a conventional way of living, i.e. from drink, drugs, depression, promiscuity and the like, to home, family and domestic bliss. However, if this is the true ‘meaning of life’ as promoted in the Alpha publicity and literature, it is a far cry from the wrestling with real fundamental existential problems which, for example, the educationalists Freire and Faundez (see Freire and Faundez, 1989) suggest, and which came across in the questionnaires and interviews which form a substantial part of the present research. In the view of Freire and Faundez, real knowledge begins with asking questions rather than settling for answers.

Also, again it is difficult to gauge the extent of exaggeration in all these testimonies. Lifton writes of the power of the myth to distort one’s perception of reality to such an extent that one can actually rewrite one’s own past experience. Lifton observes, in relation to Chinese Communism, as noted above, that one’s own individual experience (as well as historical events more widely) can be made to conform to the myth being propagated:
This tendency in the totalist approach to broad historical events was described in relationship to Chinese Communism by John K. Fairbank and Mary C. Wright:

.....stock characters like capitalist imperialists from abroad, feudal and semi-feudal reactions at home, and the resistance and liberation movements of "the people" enact a morality play. This melodrama sees aggression, injustice, exploitation, and humiliation engulf the Chinese people until salvation comes at last with Communism. Mass revolutions require an historical myth as part of their black and white morality, and this is the ideological myth of one of the great revolutions of world history.... The inspiring force of such myths cannot be denied; nor can one ignore their capacity for mischief. For when the myth becomes fused with the totalist sacred science, the resulting "logic" can be so compelling and coercive that it simply replaces the realities of individual experience. Consequently, past historical events are retrospectively altered, wholly rewritten, or ignored, to make them consistent with the doctrinal logic. (Lifton, 1961, p. 431).

It is also unknown how far the changes in lifestyle and outlook of those whose testimonies are reported would have occurred naturally anyway, or, in some cases, how long the claimed beneficial results would actually last. It would be necessary, to test the latter, to revisit these individuals to discover how far, for example, deeply damaged relationships, as in some of the cases of broken marriages, have been permanently repaired.

These testimonies also contrast with the recollections of the individuals interviewed during the course of the present research whose claims for the course were usually much more modest and who had both positive and negative things to say about their experiences of it. Even given the limited nature of the present research, it is difficult not to see the testimonies given in Alpha News as essentially propagandist in nature. Thus they may be extreme rather than typical examples of people who have been on an Alpha course, but a much larger sample would be needed to be sure. Nevertheless, the testimonies given are in keeping with the triumphalist tone of Alpha News, and it would in fact be rather surprising if they were anything less than overwhelmingly approving of the course.
Chapter Five - Review of Alpha Publications

Over the last two decades Holy Trinity Brompton has produced a great deal of material in the form of books, audio-cassettes and videotapes to resource Alpha courses, including preparation and follow-up. Much of this material is authored by Nicky Gumbel himself, published by Kingsway Publications or, more recently, HTB Publications or Alpha Publications.

To give an indication of the content, methods and theology of Alpha, and thereby further examine Alpha’s claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and explore the actual function of its teaching content and methods, some of the more important of these resources are examined below. The Alpha course is primarily visual and audible rather than written. Presentation is important. For these reasons, audio and visual material is included, as are impressions gleaned from an Alpha Conference. The resources examined are:

Gumbel, N, The Alpha Course, (AUDIO-CASSETTES), HTB 1993

Alpha Administrator’s Handbook, HTB, (undated, but purchased January 1999)
Millar, S, Developing Ministry on Alpha, (VIDEOTAPE), HTB 1999

Notes taken during the London Alpha Conference, 16-17 November 2000, Holy Trinity Brompton.

The Talks

The book Questions of Life contains the fifteen talks which form the input for the course. They may be delivered by a local speaker, or the local church can simply view Gumbel’s presentation on video or listen to it on audio-tape.

The audio-tape of the first talk (Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant) includes a “testimony” delivered by Mark Westcott (the talks are often punctuated by such testimonies) outlining his initial antipathy towards Christianity, his immoral lifestyle (“cynical”, “bad-tempered”, “got drunk at the Alpha supper”) and his subsequent conversion (“a very strong sense that Jesus is there with you”) and change of lifestyle (“not now going to make a horror movie”). He says that there was a "distant tradition of Christianity" in his life before, "but I wouldn't say my parents were Christian."

It is characteristic of Alpha that clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ lines are drawn and judgements made about who is a Christian and who is not. Gumbel himself says, "I've been a Christian for eighteen years, but I've not been a Christian for longer than I have been a Christian." This statement only makes sense when one realises the importance of the crisis moment of decision in this kind of theology. (See the detailed analysis of testimonies recorded in Alpha News, in Chapter Four).
The second chapter or talk, *Who is Jesus*, illustrates the uncritical way Scripture is used in *Alpha*. Thus Jesus's words in John's Gospel are regarded as the literal words of Christ, even though they differ considerably from those in the Synoptic Gospels. The Fourth Gospel is not seen as in any way rhetorical, designed to fulfil the author's stated evangelistic (rather than historical) intentions:

> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.  
> (John, chapter 20, verses 30-31, New International Version).

Gumbel uses various texts from John's Gospel which point to the divinity of Jesus, but attributes them directly to Jesus rather than to the early church which produced them. Luke Johnson, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, makes this distinction when he says that in John's Gospel "we find perhaps one of the strongest statements anywhere in the New Testament of the early Christian belief that Jesus was God manifested in the flesh" (Johnson, 1999, p.544). Similarly, Gumbel's 'evidence' for Jesus's resurrection makes no attempt to understand the nature of the Gospel literature, particularly the powerfully symbolic and proleptic use of language in John's Gospel ("As always in this Gospel, the words of Jesus himself provide the transition from the gospel narrative to the story being lived out by the community addressed by the Fourth Gospel" [Johnson, 1999, p.533]) but rather revolves around whether or not the tomb was empty - a piece of knowledge to which we simply do not have access - and his appearances to the disciples - again treating the narrative as if it were a piece of straight reportage. More promising might be Gumbel's pointers towards the birth of the church and the Christian experience of millions down the centuries, though these may be considered evidence of a present reality rather than a crude form of proof of some event in the past. The proof-text methodology used in this chapter (or talk) is also used frequently elsewhere in the talks and materials.

The third chapter or talk, *Why did Jesus Die?*, describes the penal substitution theory of atonement, fundamental to most Evangelical theology, both conservative and Charismatic, and an integral part of *Alpha* teaching. It starts from the premise that we are "cut off from God" (p.44). We "deserve punishment" (p.46) because of our sin, but God "came to earth, in the person of his Son Jesus to die instead of us" (p.47). Gumbel illustrates the point by quoting the example from the book *Miracle on the River Kwai* of the man who offered himself to die instead of others. Strangely, this analogy would make God into the Japanese guard who "began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury" and shrieking "All die! All die!" [p.47]. No doubt this would be to push the analogy too far, but the notion that God demands the death of someone is the rather unsavoury but necessary concomitant of this particular theory of atonement.

The fourth chapter or talk, *How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?*, again illustrates the proof-text method. On one page in the chapter (p.62) there are nine scripture
references used in quick succession to 'prove' Gumbel's doctrinal points. They are taken from John's Gospel, the book of Revelation, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, his first letter to the Corinthians, the first epistle of John and the book of Isaiah. These references also illustrate his particular emphasis on the Pauline and Johannine literature. The tape reveals how quickly and easily these references are given by Gumbel and looked up by his audience. This, and the sympathetic murmurs of approval and enthusiastic laughter imply a largely supportive audience familiar with the bible. Gumbel's frequent references to his university days, dinner parties, types of wine and the like, and the obvious ease with which these references are accepted and understood by his audience imply the preponderance of a particular social group (see the suggestions for further research in Chapter Ten). These illustrations (life at university, wine and cheese, balls and supper parties) along with quotes from The Times newspaper and the assumption of biblical knowledge ("You will know the story....") are continued into the fifth talk, Why and How Should I Read The Bible?, and the conservative use of scripture is again illustrated by Gumbel moving seamlessly from "inspired" (common currency amongst all Christian) to "inerrant" (a specifically conservative position).

Gumbel's caricaturing and then demolishing of contrary arguments is well illustrated in this talk:

> Some people say, "I don't want this rule book. It is too restrictive - all those rules and regulations. I want to be free. If you live by the Bible, you are not free to enjoy life."

(p.79).

There are far more serious objections to Gumbel's use of the bible than the vague notion that it takes away freedom, not least his uncritical and rather selective approach, illustrated above and below.

The sixth talk, Why and How do I Pray?, attempts to deal with the question of 'unanswered' prayer, i.e. asking God for something that then doesn't occur. The explanation offered is that it is one's own fault as a result of disobedience, wrong motives or a misunderstanding of God's will. Each of these, however, assumes a basic mechanistic understanding of prayer which somehow isn't working in particular cases. In that sense, this is a discussion operating within rather narrow Evangelical parameters. It may be that the real explorer of the meaning of life has some rather more fundamental questions to ask which don't assume a personal listening and responding deity.

The seventh talk, Who is the Holy Spirit?, moves into the Holy Spirit Weekend and features some of the most distinctively Charismatic Evangelical theology. There is much about 'being filled with the Holy Spirit' but little mention of baptism or Confirmation - the two rites which, within Anglicanism, are usually most closely associated with the Holy Spirit. Instead, there is an emphasis on the Holy Spirit coming on particular people at particular times for particular tasks, and various individuals are selected from the Old Testament in the bible to illustrate the point.
Gumbel acknowledges a shift in the New Testament towards the Holy Spirit coming upon all people but Alpha still interprets this in individualistic terms, i.e. the Spirit comes upon each one individually rather than upon the church as a whole. The latter alternative pneumatology could be illustrated by reference to 1 Corinthians, chapter three, where Paul describes the Christian community as the "Temple of God", the place where God's Spirit dwells. The New Testament scholar Richard Hays comments:

The image here is of the Spirit dwelling not in the individual Christian but in the gathered community.
(Hays, 1997, p.57).

This talk on the audio-tape also refers to:

...people who are now running the Church of England: John Stott, Michael Green, David McInness, David Watson, John Collins, Dick Lucas.
(Tape 7, Side 1).

Given that Gumbel is using the term 'now' loosely, this is still an interesting selection of people. All are (or were) leading Evangelical figures, but none carry much theological weight outside what Martin Percy has described as the Evangelical "pre-modern kraal":

Jim Packer is one of the foremost reformed and conservative Evangelical thinkers in the Western world. A recent volume of essays - Doing Theology for the People of God - paid tribute to his work. The occasion for the Festschrift was Packer's seventieth birthday, and the contributors are distinguished writers from the reformed world. Packer's influence amongst Evangelicals cannot be underestimated (sic)...... Packer is talked up as a giant of modern theology. Giant he may be, but surely only within the kraal of conservative evangelicalism. Packer is seldom found on any reading list within a mainstream university

Evangelical scholarship is in its own ghetto. Rather than engaging in 'secular' faculties of theology and religious studies, evangelicals have tended to prefer the safety of their own seminaries and colleges where their fundamentals can be propagated without dilution or interruption. The price to pay for this has been self-imposed marginalization.

Packer himself represents a conservative rather than Charismatic form of Evangelicalism, but those in Gumbel's list represent overlap between the two related traditions.
The eighth talk, *What does the Holy Spirit Do?*, still makes no reference to baptism, but does remark that denominations do not matter. Evangelical loyalties cut across denominational boundaries but do not encourage dialogue between denominations. Percy refers to Walter Hollenweger on this subject:

Hollenweger recognises that Charismatic-fundamentalism is transdenominational, but this will not have a unifying effect on the denominations themselves, since this particular form of belief is non-dialogical in essence.


Gumbel speaks quite disparagingly in this talk about the church outside *Alpha* - particularly the Church of England. Despite having being ordained a priest himself, he caricatures the priestly function as "doing the magic" and "dominating". He also distinguishes between those Christians who are filled with the Spirit and those who are not. Every Christian has it, but not all are filled with it, claims Gumbel. Yet it is precisely this kind of two-tier system of first-class and second-class Christians which irks many clergy and others. Similarly in the next talk, *How Can I be Filled with the Spirit?*, Gumbel distinguishes between those Christians who are "firing on all cylinders" (filled with the Spirit) and those Christians who are not. For support, Gumbel refers to the book of Acts, and people experiencing "heat" or "wind" when the Spirit comes. People need to "experience" that God loves them - by which Gumbel seems to mean an experience at the 'Ministry Time' on the Holy Spirit Weekend, rather than something experienced practically through the care of others. Gumbel speaks of people expressing their love and their emotion in church, equating the coming of the Spirit with emotional expression during worship. Percy discusses this phenomenon in detail in his chapter, *Erotic Ideology in Experiential Religion*, (Percy, 1998). Briefly:

This is why such preaching frequently incites believers to "receive like children": only then can Jesus emerge as the romantic super-hero, who will sweep the believers off their feet.


Also in this talk Gumbel prepares the ground for the most controversial element of the course: speaking in tongues, or glossolalia. He aims to convey the absolute normality of such a gift for Christians, and caricatures those who have reservations about such manifestations as being too "British". Objections stem from "doubt", "fear", and "inadequacy". Thus any potential criticism is stymied by questioning the faith, integrity and stability of the critic, rather than addressing the real theological, sociological and psychological issues. More is said about this key aspect of the *Alpha* course later in this study (see Chapter Eight).

During the tenth talk, *How Can I Resist Evil?*, an insight into the world-view propagated by *Alpha* is revealed in Gumbel's extraordinary statement, without elucidation, that "before we are Christians, the devil has little interest in us." The implication seems to be that anyone who is not a Christian can act only in an amoral
way. By contrast, he claims that the devil conspires to stop people getting to *Alpha* meetings and attacked him when he was considering getting ordained. There is clearly an external battle between good and evil going on in this theology, though Gumbel reassures his audience that "we" are on the side that is good and that is winning. Our own role in this cosmic battle is further illustrated in the eleventh talk, *How does God Guide Us?*, by Gumbel's anecdote of divine intervention: "A thought may come into our mind. For example, a friend was having an asthma attack and a thought came into my mind to see him." God intervenes to guide people through "dreams, visions, prophecies, an audible voice, and angels." He speaks "increasingly in supernatural, unusual, dramatic ways." We will know if we are following God's way for us because "if it's right we'll get God's peace. There'll be a strong desire to do it." Gumbel appears unconcerned about the possibilities of self-delusion and self-justification inherent in this search for signs, neither does he ask why God should play such games with us. It appears to be an attempt to recapture something of what Gumbel perceives to have been present in the early days of the church but has subsequently got lost. It takes no cognizance, however, of the thought-world of the time and place in which that church began.

In the twelfth talk, *Why and How Should We Tell Others?*, Gumbel equates "good deeds" with "talking about Jesus" and is rather condemnatory about those who "live out a Christian life but never talk about it." He believes that talking about Jesus to people should happen naturally. Interestingly, in support of this Gumbel quotes Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, verses 13-16, which talks about not hiding our light under a bowl (NIV). However, he disregards the end of the same passage which talks specifically about "good deeds", not "talking about Jesus." He also gives the examples of Shaftesbury and Wilberforce as two individuals who influenced society for the good, although it could be argued that they were both concerned with practical reform rather than just "talking about Jesus." This talk also makes plain Gumbel's clear distinction between 'us' (who have Christ) and 'them' (who don't) in his discussion of opportunities to "lead someone to Christ" rather than to discover Christ in them.

In the thirteenth talk, *Does God Heal Today?*, Gumbel talks about the visit to HTB (Holy Trinity Brompton) of the American evangelist John Wimber. Wimber introduced the idea of 'Words of Knowledge', i.e. messages from God about other people in the room, for example seeing "adulterer" written on someone's forehead. Gumbel says that he was initially sceptical of Wimber's claim, as was everyone else in the room, and "the level of faith in the room was zero". The apparently casual use of this latter phrase disguises its powerful effect. To Gumbel's audience, scepticism about Wimber now suddenly becomes a lack of faith - presumably in God Gumbel relates how Wimber miraculously told people about their historical medical conditions and healed them (though without acknowledging that these healings are always of invisible complaints, like backache, or, in one case, "barrenness"). Gumbel then remarked that "our level of faith was much higher." Gumbel says that Wimber's only prayer was "more power, Lord" and "every time he prayed it, it turned up the voltage a bit." One can only guess at the psychological pressure felt by those who are subjected to such intense and animated praying. The theological
support offered by Gumbel for this practice is drawn from various proof texts, particularly in the book of Exodus.

Gumbel appears to be attempting to create an environment in which the miraculous is suddenly unexceptional. Indeed, the talks on the Holy Spirit prior to the Ministry Time are intended precisely to create an atmosphere in which overt divine intervention in the form of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the attendant verbal and possibly physical indicators of his presence, is to be expected. What would appear extraordinary in any other context, is now quite normal. R J Lifton, writing forty years earlier about brainwashing techniques used in communist China, describes what he calls “the aura of half-reality” which characterizes the totalist environment:

[A] characteristic feature of ideological totalism [is] the subordination of human experience to the claims of doctrine. This primacy of doctrine over person is evident in the continual shift between experience itself and the highly abstract interpretation of such experience - between genuine feelings and spurious cataloguing of feelings. It has much to do with the peculiar aura of half-reality which a totalist environment seems, at least to the outsider, to possess.

(Lifton, 1961, p.430).

In Gumbel’s theological world view, events are interpreted as God trying to tell him things, because it is fundamental to the belief system that God operates in this way. Hence, Gumbel will describe a series of occurrences which together, to him, make it quite obvious that God is trying to tell him something. Both he and his audience laugh at how ridiculous it is to suppose that these remarkable ‘coincidences’ could be anything other than God’s obvious message. To the outsider, all this must have a “peculiar aura of half-reality”.

In the same talk Gumbel develops his understanding of the Kingdom of God. He recognises that it is central to Jesus’s teaching, that it is "God’s rule and reign on earth", that it is here and now, and that it will be completed when Jesus comes a second time to set up a new heaven and a new earth. He says there will be a judgement made between those who reject Jesus Christ, and those who believe in Jesus Christ. It will be the latter who inherit the Kingdom of God. This interpretation fits in with Gumbel’s penal substitution theory of atonement, and it is based on strands of thought to be found in Scripture. However, there are other strands which are being ignored. For example, Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25, expresses the view that those who inherit the kingdom are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner, and give hospitality to the stranger, rather than those who "believe in Jesus".

Gumbel goes on to explain that healing the sick is a sign of the age to come, so not everyone is healed - we have to wait for the second coming for that - but we get a foretaste of it with some getting healed. However, physical healing is presumably
only an issue in this present physical world, so Gumbel's talk of the world to come is not much help in solving the problems raised by this selectively interventionist God.

This talk also contains an example of the proof-text method whereby a text is interpreted in an eccentric way so as to support and not subvert a preconceived doctrine, rather than allowed to speak for itself. John, chapter 14, verse twelve says:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

(NIV).

Gumbel says that no-one could do "greater" miracles than Jesus, so he must mean a greater number of miracles. Thus, at a stroke, the problem of an inconvenient text is resolved by simply changing its obvious meaning.

Keith Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, in the book that marked his transition from the champion of conservative orthodoxy to a much more critical approach to Scripture, A Vision to Pursue, (Ward, 1991), points out the inadequacy of this kind of *a priori* approach:

The *a priori* road to faith is filled with false beliefs. It is never good enough to believe something because we think it ought to be true. In fact, to base items of faith upon such a process is, ironically, to base it on an extreme form of rationalistic pride. We believe something because, in the end, we think a God who conforms to our expectations would have said it.


This talk also again illustrates the selectivity of this proof-text method. Gumbel quotes various examples of Jesus giving commissions to heal, i.e. commanding his disciples to heal the sick, and therefore commanding us to do the same. He refers to Mark's Gospel, chapter 16, verses 15-20, and says: "Jesus says they will do this, that and the other, and heal the sick." Unfortunately, the verses which Gumbel glosses over with "this, that and the other" say that the disciples will: "drive out demons, speak in new tongues, pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all." Gumbel chooses not to mention these 'biblical' injunctions. Neither does he mention the NIV footnote: "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16 vs 9-20."

In the same talk Gumbel quotes examples of mass healings as described in the book of Acts, caricaturing criticism ("People say it only belonged to the apostolic age") but again never really addressing the rhetorical nature of the literature. Referring to the miraculous powers of the primitive church, he says: "That's what we need to get back to today." No cognizance is taken of the world view prevalent at the time, nor of biblical criticism.
Gumbel disparages those who are “not prepared to believe that God can heal”, again misrepresenting his critics, who are more concerned about those whom this kind of interventionist God does not heal. Gumbel is attempting to recapture what he perceives to have been the experience of the early church. He quotes examples of modern miraculous healings without regard for the theological implications. He says that “We just ask God to heal people”, but he also says that we must only pray for healing for people whom we love. However, he hedges his bets (“They may not necessarily be healed, because we live in this period between the times”) in a way not found in the New Testament to which Gumbel appeals directly elsewhere.

The crudely mechanistic nature of Gumbel’s theology of prayer and healing is apparent here (“The more we pray for people the more we see people are healed”) as is his theodicy in that “back pain” is related to sin (“unforgivefulness”).

The origins of Gumbel’s antipathy towards the Church are apparent in the fourteenth talk, What About The Church? where he describes his own early experience of the Church as unutterably boring and guilt-inducing. He now clearly questions the sincerity of expressions of Christian devotion other than those of his own adopted Charismatic Evangelical tradition. He describes an early girlfriend who “wasn’t a Christian but just liked going to church on a Sunday morning.” He sees the church as a group of people who are agreed about certain "essential" beliefs. These must include resurrection and “Jesus is God.” Unity, for Gumbel, means unity of doctrinal belief. He is suspicious of churches which do not embrace his tradition (“Many churches have lost God.” “There’s no sense of the presence of God.”). Also, despite his ordination as a priest into an episcopal church (the Church of England) he disowns this (“If I am a priest, you are priests”). This attack on the very church and rite of ordination which gives him precisely the authority and platform he uses, is echoed in Sandy Millar’s use of the title "Prebendary" to give weight to his similar attack on the Church of England which gave him that title, in his video-talk discussed below.

In this talk, Gumbel reads from a letter which confirms the rather comfortable version of Christianity which Alpha offers and which leaves some critics uneasy. The letter is from a couple who have been coming to HTB for a year:

After only a year, coming to church on a Sunday already feels like coming home. The atmosphere of love, friendship and excitement is impossible to find elsewhere. The joy of it far exceeds any evening at the pub, party or restaurant - I’m shocked to say.

This extract raises the whole question about worship as entertainment, confirms the chief attraction as being the warmth (in which case is the series of talks necessary?) and raises issues about Christianity being primarily concerned with escape from, rather than engagement with the world outside. There is no sense of challenge, nor of self-denial for the sake of others that for some is at the heart of the Christian gospel. This kind of church appears to be in the business of attracting crowds by
giving them a good time rather than having anything to do with a crucified Christ. It is these concerns that have led at least one critic to describe *Alpha* as:

A slightly nerdy, harmless get-together for people who want a faith that matches their curtains and holiday plans, but underneath it is that old prescriptive chapter-and-verse absolutism that's going to send the rest of us to hell.

(Gill, 2001).

*Telling Others*

Gumbel's book, *Telling Others* (1994), is a sequel to *Questions of Life*, setting out principles and practicalities of the *Alpha* course and including a number of personal testimonies from individuals who have completed the course.

The first ten pages of *Telling Others* contain sixty-five personal endorsements of *Alpha*, some of them quite lengthy, from church leaders of various denominations, mostly of Evangelical persuasion. Such endorsements play a large part in *Alpha* publicity to emphasise the mainstream orthodox credentials of what is being offered.

The first chapter of the book points to what I have termed a 'de-Christianizing' (See Chapter Four) process which some *Alpha* candidates apparently undergo during the course, i.e. discovering that they were not proper Christians before (though they previously thought they were) but concluding that they are now:

Some are already Christians but will often say, in retrospect, that at the start of the course they were Christians "without any real experience of God"

(Gumbel, 1994a, p.26).

The "experience of God" being referred to here is a visible, demonstrable experience of a Charismatic type, e.g. physical healing, speaking in tongues or some other supernatural manifestation of divine power. For *Alpha*, these are the authentic experiences of God. Without them there is something seriously lacking. It is not enough to experience God in creation or Christ in the Gospels, without personal supernatural experiences as well.

The course is presented as the Christian gospel, not simply as one version of it:

We welcome them all. Some will complete the whole course and still not be Christians at the end; we hope they will be unable to say they have not heard the gospel.

(p.26).

This means that some who complete the course but find it unsatisfactory (a group about which little is known) may believe that they are rejecting the whole of
Christianity rather than just one manifestation of it. This will be a cause of concern to those who see the Christian faith in much wider terms and are concerned about how it is perceived by others.

The centrality of manifestations of supernatural activity is evident in what is termed "power evangelism" at the heart of Alpha:

Thirdly, there is power evangelism, where the proclamation of the gospel goes hand in hand with a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 2:1-5). We include this third element because we believe it is firmly based in New Testament practice. (p.31).

This states clearly the attempt to recapture what Gumbel sees as supernatural activity characteristic of the early church but neglected by many churches today. Similarly:

In the gospels, the central theme in the teaching of Jesus is the kingdom of God. The coming of the kingdom involved not only the spoken proclamation of the gospel but also a visible demonstration of its presence by signs, wonders and miracles. Each of the gospel writers expected these to continue. (p.32).

Gumbel's assertion that the Gospel writers intended that these "signs and wonders" should continue right up to the present day is based on a reading of Matthew chapter 28, verses 19 and 20, where Jesus tells his followers to make disciples and "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." This is a tenuous basis upon which to build an insistence that there should be similar signs and wonders here and now. It also pays no regard to the cultural context of the ancient world in which signs and wonders and the supernatural in general were part of the accepted world view. Neither is any attention paid to the many parables of the Kingdom told by Jesus to illustrate its nature and the criteria, often ethical, by which people enter it. These form a greater part of its significance in the Gospels than the signs and wonders which herald its coming. Gumbel's selectivity is further illustrated by his pointing to the miracles that accompanied Jesus's proclamation of the gospel in Mark, chapter one, but omitting references to the casting out of demons, complete with speeches by the latter. Gumbel glosses over whether or not we are still to cast out such demons or whether that understanding of illness should be left in the ancient world. If the latter, why should not the understanding of signs and wonders be left there also? However, Gumbel is clearly keen to get signs and wonders on to the agenda and that the church should see them as an integral part of the gospel and a normal part of orthodox Christian teaching and practice:

Signs, wonders and miracles are part of the kingdom which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ and continues to this day. Hence we should expect to see the supernatural display of the power of the
Holy Spirit as part of his kingdom activity and as an authentication of the good news.
(p.35).

In the third chapter of his book, Gumbel makes some reference to *Alpha* drop-outs:

We surveyed a recent course which had around 400 guests and found that between 60 and 80 people had dropped out. When we analysed why, we found the following reasons.

First they stopped coming because of us. We did not run the course as well as we might have done......

Secondly, people drop out for good reasons. For example, some people move to another part of the country. Increasingly, however, people are able to carry on the course where they move to.....

Thirdly, people drop out for reasons connected with the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3-8, 18-23). Jesus said that some people's hearts are hard: they are simply not ready to hear and they often leave after the first evening. Sometimes they come back on the next course, or a year later.....

Some drop out because of personal troubles in their lives, or through persecution or ridicule.....

We've found that a relationship or success at work or some other distraction may take people away either during or even after the end of the course (pp.64&65).

Significantly, the reasons for failure are given as poor presentation or because of actions or attitudes on the part of the participants. There is no recognition that *Alpha* itself might be unsatisfying or at fault in any way. The questionnaires upon which the survey is based were given out at the end of the course, so there is no way of knowing why people drop out before the end, never to return, and we are not given any indication of what proportion this is. No indication is given of how or why this particular course was chosen for the survey. Gumbel's reasons for failure can only be conjecture, based on accounts of those who returned later. During my own research I interviewed individuals who had left the course for reasons to do with the course itself, and these are examined in Chapter Eight. One journalist wrote of *Alpha*:

Anecdotally, there is evidence the course has a huge fall-off rate: people become obsessed for a short period and then drop out. Like Coca-Cola, it has been said, the course has fizz, but this goes flat. (Appleyard, 2001).

The *Alpha* course is advertised as a course in which there is an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and it is made clear that even though the talks may not be significantly altered in content, the discussion groups provide an opportunity for
this exploration to take place. However, the guidance given to group leaders in *Telling Others* makes it clear that such open-endedness is not to be encouraged:

Even if someone says something that is not correct (my emphasis), a good leader will respond with a phrase like "How interesting", or "I have never heard that before", or "It might mean that...", and will then bring in the rest of the group to try to reach the right conclusion (my emphasis).

(p.103).

The 'correct' interpretation of biblical passages has also been decided in advance, with no acknowledgement of original context, critical examination or room for discussion, and there is always a direct application to ourselves:

Then it is helpful to give a short introduction. For example, when studying the story of the Prodigal Son, one might begin by saying, "Obviously, the father represents God and the son represents us. Let us see what lessons we can draw from the passage."

(p.104).

Gumbel is confident that he knows what the deepest needs of his hearers are, and that he has a straightforward solution to them:

I explain in the talk at the Alpha supper that Jesus Christ meets our deepest needs. I know that those listening who are not yet Christians will be struggling somewhere deep down with a lack of ultimate meaning and purpose in their lives; they will have no satisfactory answer to the inevitable fact of death or the universal problem of guilt. In all probability they will also be aware of a sense of "cosmic loneliness", a sense of being in God's world without the God for and by whom they were made. Aware of these needs I try to show how Jesus dealt with our guilt on the cross, how he defeated death by his resurrection, how he made possible a relationship with God which gives meaning and purpose to life, and how he gives us his Holy Spirit so that we need never experience that cosmic loneliness.

(p.120).

R J Lifton is also aware of people's deep-rooted feelings of guilt and shame, and the way these can be used by a controlling leader to manipulate people, particularly if the leader has the capacity to offer forgiveness:

People vary greatly in their susceptibilities to guilt and shame (as my subjects illustrated), depending upon patterns developed early in life. But since guilt and shame are basic to human existence, this variation can be no more than a matter of degree. Each person is made vulnerable through his profound inner sensitivities to his
own limitations and to his unfulfilled potential; in other words, each is made vulnerable through his existential guilt. Since ideological totalists become the ultimate judges of good and evil within their world, they are able to use these universal tendencies toward guilt and shame as emotional levers for their controlling and manipulative influences. They become the arbiters of existential guilt, authorities without limit in dealing with others' limitations. And their power is nowhere more evident than in their capacity to "forgive".

(Lifton, 1961, p.424).

The forgiveness offered on the Alpha course, emphasising the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, inevitably fosters a profound sense of gratitude to God, Alpha and Nicky Gumbel.

It is impossible to judge to what extent Gumbel is right in his assessment of the spiritual, emotional and psychological state of his audience, though one might be sceptical of the supposed sharp division between those (non-Christians) who suffer from this existential angst and those (Christians) who don't. How deeply satisfying in the long-term what Gumbel is offering might be remains to be seen. Gill (2001) sees the members of the course as a "happy-clappy, dinner-party, lonely-hearts club", while Julia Llewelyn Smith, writing in The Times, notes that Gumbel "didn't create our spiritual hunger, but he knows how to feed it" (Smith, 2001), while Appleyard sees Gumbel's gospel as a little too shallow and a little too comfortable:

There is far too little emphasis on sin, on the deep difficulties of surviving as a Christian in the modern world, on the problems of vanity and complacency often associated with conversion, and far too much emphasis on feeling good about oneself... Christianity is not about feeling good. It is about feeling very bad indeed. At its heart is the vision of a world so wicked that, confronted with a man of perfect goodness, it nailed him to a cross. It is a doctrine of our utter iniquity, salvation from which is hard-won and never guaranteed. But try selling that in Knightsbridge.

(Appleyard, 2001).

One of the key selling-points of Alpha is the claim that there is no pressure on anyone to accept what is on offer. Yet Gumbel speaks of the importance of persuasion and that each individual must make a decision. "Don't know" is not an option:

Ultimately, if we are to persuade people to make a decision we need to appeal to their wills. In an evangelistic talk I try to drop a hint early on that there is a decision to be made, that there is no neutral ground, and there are no "don't knows" in the kingdom of God. I let them know what the options are. They can refuse Christ or accept him or just put off the decision. All this must be done
without any pressure. It is right to persuade but wrong to pressurise.
(Gumbel, 1994a, p.122).

If such a stark choice is put before people with such profound consequences (entry into, or exclusion from the Kingdom of God) it is difficult to see how this is anything other than severe pressurising. The disqualification of those who "don't know" infers that Christianity is about knowledge, which you either have or you don't have. The pressure is on to claim knowledge of things which none of us can ever know in any meaningful sense of the word. Certainty in religious belief is a characteristic of a fundamentalism which rules out ever really listening to someone else's point of view with an open mind or with the humility to acknowledge that one might have something to learn. Thus, the purpose of Alpha is to supply the 'correct' answer, whether or not this does justice to the questions people are asking. And the answer has to be accepted here and now for entry into the Kingdom of God to be achieved. The insistence that Alpha has the one and only objective truth is firmly underlined again on page 122:

Of course, the message we want to get across is objectively true and much of what we say will be proclaiming that truth.

Such attempts to persuade people of one revealed 'objective' truth, sit very uneasily with Alpha's claim to offer an 'exploration'.

It is evident that Gumbel believes that the particular brand of Charismatic Evangelical Christianity which he propounds is the only authentic form of Christianity. Those who do not share his enthusiasm for it are rejecting Christ. Those who accept most of it, but not his particular teaching about the Holy Spirit, are at best second-class Christians:

Others may already be Christians but have never really experienced God or the power of the Holy Spirit.
(p.141).

For Gumbel, experience of God means a visible, supernatural experience such as glossolalia, or 'speaking in tongues'. The pressure on the individual to conform to expectations is again clear:

As we pray for the person we stay facing them and, if they have no objection, we lay hands on them. Then, keeping our eyes open, we ask the Holy Spirit to come. We welcome him when we see signs of his working and wait on God as we pray for further directions... On the Alpha Weekend we often pray for people to receive the gift of tongues. This is not because it is the most important gift but because the Alpha course is a beginner's course and the gift of tongues is a beginners’ gift.... Both in the bible and in experience it is often the first obviously supernatural gift of the Spirit which
people receive. Our understanding of the New Testament is that it is available to all Christians and therefore we can pray with great confidence for them to receive.
(p.141).

Gill offers a tongue-in-cheek description of speaking in tongues on Alpha:

On the face of it, it's evening class faith with Linguaphone speaking in tongues. They really do beginner's tongue-speak: how to ask for directions, order a cappuccino and politely instruct the devil to leave the body of your daughter.
(Gill, 2001).

Humour aside, the suggestion of coaching in speaking in tongues is not inaccurate:

When praying for people to receive the gift of tongues I have found the greatest barrier is a psychological one - making the first sound. Once a person has made the first sound the rest usually follows quite naturally. In order to help people get over this barrier I explain this difficulty and suggest that they start by copying what I or one of the other prayers is saying. Then I start to speak in tongues slowly so that they can follow. Once they have made the first sound they are usually away praying in their own language. I encourage them to try and concentrate on their relationship with God and try, as far as possible, not to be self-conscious. Rather they should concentrate on praising God with the new language he has given them... After we have finished praying for a person to be filled with the Spirit, receive a gift, be healed or whatever it is, we should ask what is happening and what they sense God is saying to them. We should encourage them to hold on to the promises of God, and warn them against possible increased temptation. We don't believe it is possible that "nothing has happened" (my emphasis).
(Gumbel, 1994a, p.142).

R J Lifton described this kind of personal psychological manipulation in relation to brainwashing in communist China:

Initiated from above, it seeks to provoke specific patterns of behaviour and emotion in such a way that these will appear to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment. This element of planned spontaneity, directed as it is by an ostensibly omniscient group, must assume, for the manipulated, a near-mystical quality.
(Lifton, 1961, p.422).

The pressure from those around to conform (staring into the subject's eyes, laying on of hands, verbal prayer) is intense. The descriptions given by the subjects after the
event (sensations of heat, elation, etc.) certainly have a “near-mystical quality”. Lifton goes on to write of the importance of ‘trust’ in this form of manipulation:

At the level of the individual person, the psychological responses to this manipulative approach revolve about the basic polarity of trust and mistrust. One is asked to accept these manipulations on a basis of ultimate trust (or faith): “like a child in the arms of its mother,” as Father Luca accurately perceived. He who trusts in this degree can experience the manipulations within the idiom of the mystique behind them: that is, he may welcome their mysteriousness, find pleasure in their pain, and feel them to be necessary for the fulfillment of the “higher purpose” which he endorses as his own.

(Lifton, 1961, p.422).

It is clearly imperative, for Alpha theology to survive, that a response is evinced from the person who is being subjected to this pressure to speak in tongues. Non-compliance is not permitted. It would take great courage to hold out against it, but then someone who had doubts about Alpha and had the strength to resist would probably not have got this far. Once the person has succumbed then they too have an emotional vested interest in supporting the process and subjecting others to it. Lifton again identifies this process of ‘subordination’:

The individual then responds to the manipulation through developing what I shall call the psychology of the pawn. Feeling himself unable to escape from forces more powerful than himself, he subordinates everything to adapting himself to them. He becomes sensitive to all kinds of cues, expert at anticipating environmental pressures, and skilful in riding them in such a way that his psychological energies merge with the tide rather than turn painfully against himself. This requires that he participate actively in the manipulation of others, as well as in the endless round of betrayals and self-betrayals which are required.

(Lifton, 1961, p.423).

Clearly, if people wish to be part of this group, conformity to the norm is required. In the highly charged, expectant atmosphere of the Saturday evening meeting on the Holy Spirit Weekend, joining in is the only real option:

On the Saturday evening (at 5pm) I speak on "How can I be filled with the Spirit?" (Chapter 10 in Questions of Life). At the end of the talk I explain that I am going to invite the Holy Spirit to come and fill those who would like to be filled and give the gift of tongues to those who would like to receive. I ask everyone to stand, to close their eyes and to hold out their hands in front of them if they would like to receive.

(Gumbel, 1994a, p.143).
The person being subjected to this pressure to receive the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues is in a position where to escape would require a tremendous act of willpower, possible alienation from those around, and probably having to leave the premises. It would be extremely difficult to continue to participate in the Holy Spirit Weekend without conforming. Having succumbed, he must then either participate in pressuring others to make the same response or risk having to admit to himself that he was actually engaged in self-deception as well as the deception of those around. Given that many other participants may feel similarly, the whole enterprise could be seen in Lifton’s terms as being based on ‘betrayal and self-betrayal’. For the sake of the survival of the enterprise, there must be overwhelming resistance to any exposure of the emperor’s new clothes.

Demonstrable emotional expression, even falling over, is seen as evidence not of the suggestible state of the participants, nor of the power of the leader, but of the Holy Spirit’s activity:

I then pray a prayer which others can echo in their hearts. It is a prayer of repentance, faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. I then ask the Holy Spirit to come and fill all those who have invited him into their lives. We then wait and watch as he comes and does what he wants to do. It is always different and always exciting to see God at work in our midst. Sometimes the manifestations of the Spirit are obvious. Some are so overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit they find it hard to remain standing. Others are so deeply moved by the love of God that tears run down their faces. Some are so filled with joy that they burst out laughing.

(p.144).

Some participants give their own accounts of their experiences of the evening using similar language:

After the talk about "How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?" we all stood up and the Holy Spirit came into the room.

(p.144)

I was filled with the Holy Spirit. I felt a white sheet wipe me clean then a strong rush of light came through me from my waist and up out of my head - the feeling made me lift my arms in the air.

(p.144).

The Spirit shook me from head to foot.

(p.145).

The second of these accounts appears influenced by Peter the apostle's description of a sheet of sailcloth in Acts, chapter 10, verse 11, and the account of the Holy Spirit coming upon the apostles in Acts, chapter 2, verse 2. Both of these feature in
Gumbel's talk given prior to this 'Ministry Time', as do a number of examples of individuals showing physical manifestations of the Spirit. Gumbel clearly creates an expectation in his talk:

Sometimes, when people are filled, they shake like a leaf in the wind. Others find themselves breathing deeply as if almost physically breathing in the Spirit. Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of "glowing all over". Another said she experienced "liquid heat". Still another described "burning in my arms when I was not hot". Fire perhaps symbolises the power, passion and purity which the Spirit of God brings to our lives. (Gumbel, 1993, p.136).

Despite its strangeness, this phenomenon could be regarded as quite harmless. If people wish to act in this way and believe they are motivated to do so by the Holy Spirit, then it could be left at that. The problem for the wider church, however, is that Gumbel equates these experiences with authentic Christianity. Those who have not had these experiences have a faith which is lacking. If Gumbel is presenting this to non-believers as no more than mainstream orthodox Christianity, then there is a real problem for Christians who are concerned about evangelism but do not share Gumbel's enthusiasm for this particular theology; and the claim to be offering an exploration of the meaning of life appears to have been left well behind.

Miraculous healing is also an integral part of the Alpha course. This is specifically addressed during the 'healing evening' in Week Nine:

At this point we outline the model of healing prayer which we follow (Questions of Life, pp.213-214). We then explain that God sometimes gives words of knowledge (1 Cor 12:8) which point out whom God wants us to pray for and which are also an aid to faith in this area.

(Gumbel, 1994a, p.148).

Gumbel explains how these 'words of knowledge' work:

We have found that people receive these words in various ways. Some may get a mental picture of the part of the body which God wants to heal. Some will merely receive an impression, and others may sense that they hear or see words. We have found that one of the most common ways we receive words of knowledge is by what we call a "sympathy pain": someone senses pain in their body, which they know is not really theirs.

(p.148).
Miraculous healing then follows:

Simon Dixon, who has since become our organist, had a stabbing pain when he moved or when he was touched around his jaw or neck. It had been very painful for a year and a half and he had been told it couldn't be cured. He had lots of medical tests, but the doctors did not know what was wrong. They thought it might be a brain tumour. He was finally diagnosed as having auricular neuralgia. He was on a lot of drugs and at times his vision was affected. A woman in our congregation called Emma had felt a pain in her jaw which she thought must be a sympathy pain and therefore a word of knowledge. As a result, after praying for healing, he was sufficiently cured to come off the drugs and after further prayer was totally healed. Since then he has been perfectly healthy.

(p.148).

This kind of 'healing' has always been part of the tradition of the extreme Charismatic wing of the church, and research into the authenticity of such accounts goes beyond the limits of the present study. The significant factor here is that the creators of Alpha are at pains to point out that it has the endorsement of major figures across denominations and traditions. The claim is that "these are the things upon which we are all agreed" (Gumbel, 1998). Seeing the popularity of Alpha, those church leaders from within the main denominations who commend the course may well believe that they are simply commending those parts of it of which they approve, and not necessarily all of it. However, the authors of Alpha will not allow that. Alpha is a complete course, and the Holy Spirit Weekend is a vital part of it. Thus, the kind of miraculous manifestations which have always been there on the fringe are now being embraced and marketed as orthodox Christianity:

Alpha is now being run by all the major denominations in the UK and is endorsed by Christian leaders across the traditions. Teaching on the sacraments is limited, in the sense that we only teach on Alpha what all the major denominations and traditions are agreed about. For example, we teach about the essential meaning and necessity of baptism but we do not go into the divisive issue of infant baptism.... In the case of the teaching on Holy Communion, again we try to teach what all the major denominations agree about.

(p.193).

Gumbel is here confusing 'denomination' with 'tradition'. All denominations have their Evangelicals who use scripture in the uncritical and selective way that Alpha does, just as all the main denominations have their theologically liberal strands and, in some denominations, catholic or sacramental strands, and there are all shades in between. In playing down the role of the sacraments, Gumbel is not being ecumenical as he claims, he is simply being Evangelical. He is appealing to the
Evangelical tradition in each denomination, and neglecting the sacramental strand. Like all Evangelicals, he attaches no importance to denomination, but one would have to subscribe to his Charismatic Evangelical version of Christianity. His constituency is therefore rather narrower than he claims. Other traditions within the denominations which make use of Alpha, perhaps because they are attracted by the possibility of large numbers, either have to compromise their theological integrity by subscribing to Charismatic Evangelical dogma, or use the course selectively and risk breaching the copyright statement. Gumbel says his teaching on the sacraments is constrained by "what all the major denominations agree about", but he clearly feels no such constraint when it comes to teaching about speaking in tongues and miraculous healings.

In her study of the contemporary Church of England, Monica Furlong wrote:

"An interesting thing about Evangelicals is the looseness of their attachment to the Church of England, in contrast to their powerful attachment, via the Evangelical Alliance, with other Reformed churches. What rarely gets put into words is that they do not believe that the other sections of the Church of England are the real thing. To spend much time around Evangelicals is to get the message that one is not saved at all, a difficult basis, in its confident one-upmanship, to carry on a continuing Christian conversation."

(Furlong, 2000, p.333).

This "confident one-upmanship" is illustrated by Gumbel's dismissal of the possibility of long-term churchgoing prior to Alpha having anything to do with Christian faith. If churchgoers express their faith in a different way, it simply means they don't understand Christianity:

The daytime Alpha course has proved as successful as the evening course as a means of evangelism. This course, with its appeal to both the head and the heart, has seen many people come into relationship with Christ - from those very far away from Christianity to those who have sat in pews in churches for much of their lives, but have not understood that the heart of the Christian faith is a relationship with Jesus. One team member, who had brought about twelve people from her own church to do the morning course at Holy Trinity Brompton, said to me at the end of the ten weeks that she had sat for years in the church with these people and none of them had moved in any real way towards conversion. Now, many had been converted during the course and they all wanted to do another Alpha course.

(Gumbel, 1994a, p.177).

Journalists writing about Alpha often make reference to its conservative stance on matters of sexuality. Its similarly conservative stance on family roles, particularly
the role of women, is nicely illustrated in Gumbel's comments on the 'Morning Alpha' course:

   The main difference in the organisation and timing is the absence of the weekend away as we feel on the whole it is not practical for women to be separated from their families at the weekend... The supper party at the end of the course is an excellent setting for married women to bring their husbands who, as we have found many times, have been very pleasantly surprised at some of the changes in the lives of their spouses.

   (p.182)

No details are given!

Other Alpha Resources

In his book, Searching Issues (1994), Gumbel addresses seven issues which are most commonly raised by participants in Alpha courses but which are not covered in the talks. The issues are: Suffering, Other Religions, Sex Before Marriage, The New Age, Homosexuality, Science and Christianity, and The Trinity. Gumbel states (p.8) that the first two of these are by far the most common objections to the Christian faith. Interestingly, these two were the second and third most popular issues raised in my own initial questionnaire survey of individuals not selected according to religious belief or participation in Alpha (see Chapter Eight). (The most frequently raised issue was that of whether or not there is life after death.).

Gumbel addresses the issue of suffering in his first chapter, entitled Why Does God Allow Suffering? and this is briefly examined below to give an indication of the way the theology associated with Alpha is applied to these kinds of wider questions, whether this might constitute an 'exploration' as claimed by the Alpha publicity, and what the actual function of such theology and its application might be.

The title of the chapter immediately reveals the internal Christian nature of the question, and hence of the Alpha course, quite simply because the question in this form assumes a belief in God and, by implication, that he is all-powerful and all-loving, otherwise there would be no problem. The universal form of the question would be: "Does the existence of suffering preclude the existence of a God who is both omnipotent and all-loving?" For the Christian it is the existence of suffering which is the problem; for the non-believer it is the supposed existence of a loving God. Yet Alpha claims it is targeting the non-believer.

This is again apparent in Gumbel's use of the word "we":

   It is worth noting that suffering is not a problem for all religions. It is an acute problem for the Judeo-Christian tradition because we believe that God is both good and all-loving.

   (p.10).
He is clearly addressing fellow believers, despite this being a resource for giving to group members who are new to the course and supposedly not yet Christians.

A reading of the Creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis leads to Gumbel's belief that "all suffering is a result of sin" (p. 12). He uses the examples of God sending a flood upon the earth to drown all the wicked people, and similarly later destroying Sodom and Gomorrah because of the sinfulness of the people there. Natural disasters, he says, are the result of "disorder" (p. 15) in creation caused by Adam and Eve's sin. No indication is given, however, of how or why or what the connection could possibly be between human sinfulness and an earthquake, cyclone and every kind of cancer. This is really no more than a re-statement of the problem.

Gumbel goes on to talk about God using suffering for good in a number of ways. He says that God uses pain, bereavement and various forms of suffering to draw us to Christ. It could be argued, though, that this is a monstrous God who takes the life of a loved one to teach us a lesson. It is quite different from saying that the experience of bereavement itself may inadvertently make us think again about Christ. But this would not be a justification for suffering and is not what Gumbel is saying. He says that God uses suffering to discipline us - to build our character (p. 16) - but how are we to tell which particular suffering is intended to have this effect?

Gumbel says that if we have suffered, God can "make it up to us" (p. 21) in eternity, though this doesn't really get to grips with the problem or tell us why it exists, or make it acceptable. Finally, Gumbel admits to having no answer. He says that the notion of God suffering with us may provide some comfort but does not provide an answer, and summarises his four thoughts about suffering as follows:

- God's response to human sin.
- God works through it to bring good.
- God compensates for it in the future.
- God suffers with us.

Yet none of these actually helps us, as Gumbel claims, "to understand why a God of love should allow suffering" (p. 26). They are of no use, for example, to the child born into a famine whose life is agonizing and short, or to the young refugee who is raped, tortured and killed. It is significant that Gumbel's solutions are most appropriate for well-to-do Westerners. He is happy for his interventionist God to act directly in the lives of his congregation at HTB but does not engage with the problems this kind of theological thinking poses for God's non-intervention in the Third World and elsewhere, particularly in areas where pointless and innocent suffering is a commonplace.

The *Alpha Administrator's Handbook*, purchased in 1999, is an A4 comb-bound, ninety-four page book, designed "to take you through every stage of setting up and running an Alpha course on a step-by-step basis" (p. 4). This is regarded as important because the "image" of the church presented to non-churchgoers matters, and
because, for example, having name-badges prepared for people demonstrates commitment, and may therefore encourage a similar commitment to the course on the part of the guest, and lead to friendship. Clearly the degree of planning, preparation and leading of the course required by this handbook, if the course is to be run as specified, would be daunting for all but the most well-resourced of churches in terms of able, committed and articulate people. The outlay required for materials could also inhibit less well-off churches.

There is no doubting the desire for professionalism in the use of Alpha. Every effort is made to ensure uniformity. There is an Alpha Worship Pack available with suggested music, and recommended materials for running the course which should be ordered from HTB. These are:

- The Alpha Team Training Video
- The Alpha Videos
- Alpha Team Training Manuals for group leaders and helpers
- Alpha Manuals for all leaders, helpers and guests
- Copies of "Why Jesus?" or "Why Christmas?"

There is a constantly updated pool of resources available to any church wishing to run Alpha courses on a regular basis. Clearly, to run Alpha courses in anything like the way they are run at HTB requires a not inconsiderable and ongoing investment.

The manner in which Alpha should be run is prescribed in some detail in the Handbook, e.g.: "We would suggest that you do not put dating couples in leadership in the same group in case the relationship ends during the course" (p.28), and the guidance for the timing of the evening is equally precise:

6.15pm Prayer / Administration meeting for leaders and helpers
7.00pm Supper
7.40pm Welcome
   - Notices
   - Mention recommended reading
   - Perhaps tell a joke
7.50pm Worship
8.00pm Talk
8.45pm Coffee
9.00pm Small groups
9.45pm End.

The Handbook suggests selecting one or two people to interview who have "found the course of value and whose lives have been changed by God. They need to be brief, sincere and, if possible, humorous" (p.58). The Handbook suggests some questions to ask:

What was the Alpha course like?
What happened to you on the course?
What difference has Jesus made to your life?
What would you say to someone who has not yet done the Alpha course?

Quality control is equally tight. Alpha is protected by a copyright statement which appears in every edition of Alpha News. The Handbook also specifies that the word "Alpha" "should always be italicised, bold and in Times New Roman font" (p.80). In answer to the proffered question:

Can I make a single / several duplicate copies of the video / audio tapes for the use of our homegroups?

the answer is given:

No. Alpha resources should only be used in conjunction with the running or promotion of an Alpha course, and we do not want anyone, whether they are a guest or a leader, to be exposed to sub-standard copies.

(p.80).

This seems to imply that the quality of the message is somehow related to the quality of the materials, even that the medium is itself the message. It implies that Christianity will only be accepted if it is offered in a professional, polished way, like a commodity. This raises the question of what sort of Christianity it is that can be marketed in this way. Is it something that meets people's deepest needs, or is it something that people need to be impressed by as they might be impressed by the marketing of any other product?

There is a thinly veiled threat aimed at those who might be tempted to run Alpha on the cheap or who do not wish to buy into the whole package:

If someone wishes to photocopy only parts of the manual this may be an indication that they are running a course that is not fully Alpha (i.e. 10 weeks based on the fifteen chapters of Questions of Life). The right for them to use the name Alpha and the associated resources may have to be reassessed (my emphasis).

(p.80).

Alpha thereby becomes not something offered by its creators to contribute to the exploration of the meaning of life, nor indeed offered to the church to explore what it means to be a follower of Christ, but a tightly protected self-contained interpretation of Christianity which one either accepts in its entirety or leaves alone. It is promoted as an 'exploration', yet allows no room for exploration, deviation, criticism or selective usage. The exploration of the meaning of life is no longer a pilgrimage of discovery lasting a lifetime, nor a response to our deepest yearnings, nor a wrestling with the mystery of our existence; it is rather a copyright package summed up in fifteen easy-to-follow video talks to be bought and used without alteration, or not to be used at all.
The appendices include a list of Alpha resources, including a promotional video and the Alpha Introductory Guide:

A full-colour booklet containing an introduction to the Alpha course. It includes a step-by-step guide to an Alpha evening, the resources you will need, the support and advice available to you, and stories from around the world of people and churches which have been changed dramatically by God during the Alpha course. (p.83).

It is precisely this domestication of God and the marketing of him as part of the Alpha package that leads some to be unable to take Alpha seriously:

Alphaphobics Anonymous is in steep decline. Someone's stolen the ladder we used when daubing graffiti - usually quotations from Kierkegaard - on those appalling posters. Even our secretary, Miss Laceworthy, has defected. The promise of a free chicken salad and the possibility of a smile - all her own - from the Reverend Nicholas Gumbel was too much for her. I've made my own plans. I shall walk off the end of Southend Pier. But perhaps even then there'll be no escape. Underwater Alpha, I hear, goes from strength to strength. (Pridmore, 2001).

The Alpha Team Training Manual is an A5 sized, 43 page booklet produced by HTB for the use of leaders and helpers on the Alpha course. It gives detailed instructions and guidance as to how the groups should be run, how 'pastoral care' should be given, and how the 'Ministry Time' should be operated. The booklet illustrates how tightly the course should be controlled, and, again, despite the claim to offer "an opportunity to explore the meaning of life", how closed-ended the course actually is. There is one clearly defined required outcome: "The overall purpose of the small group, along with the course as a whole is to help to bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ" (p.1). The onus is on "correct" answers rather than exploratory questions: "Make sure you know the answers from a commentary" (p.4). Detailed instructions are given to induct people into a particular way of praying: "Put words into their mouth: 'Will you ask God to give us wisdom to understand this passage?'" (p.7). And it is not only other group members over whom the leader exercises control: "When we ask the Holy Spirit to come, he comes" (p.15).

Despite protestations that Alpha does not pressure people, the techniques which leaders are encouraged to use on their subjects at Ministry Time leave little room for dissent:
Stay facing the person you are praying for and ask the Holy Spirit to come. Welcome him when you see signs of his working and wait on God as you pray for further directions. (p.17).

Encourage the person to start to speak in another language - tell him/her you will do so yourself... Refuse to consider that nothing has happened. (p.18).

Despite the claim that this is a course targeting those outside the church, the questions discussed and the way they are to be dealt with are clearly only meaningful if the group members are already Christians. For example, in the context of studying a particular passage from the bible, the leader is to say to the group members: "What do we learn from verse eight about our relationship with Jesus Christ?" (p.26); "Take time to talk about any answers to prayer that you have seen recently" (p.30).

In the study of given bible passages, the questions (and answers) are clear, uncritical and closed-ended. The answers are to be read directly out of the text and are only really meaningful to insiders. Hence, on Proverbs, chapter 16, verses 1-9:

- What conditions does God attach to guiding us?
- What promises of success does he offer?
- How does this picture compare with your own experience?
- With so much confusion in the world how do we know that God can do it?

The Ministry Time on the Alpha Weekend is probably the most controversial aspect of Alpha, but defended by Gumbel and Millar as essential. For a definition of 'Ministry', the Manual quotes The New Bible Dictionary: "In its earliest form the Christian ministry was Charismatic, i.e. it is spiritual gift or supernatural endowment, whose exercise witnesses to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church" (Manual, p.14). For Alpha, Ministry Time is a period set aside at an Alpha Weekend when the Holy Spirit is invoked and there are likely to be physical manifestations of his power, for example speaking in tongues, 'Words of Knowledge' and miraculous healings.

HTB has produced a video of Sandy Millar speaking on the subject, entitled Developing Ministry on Alpha (1999). This is intended as a training video for those who run the Ministry Time on Alpha courses.

In the video, Millar attempts to produce a theology for 'ministry', but first pays his respects to John Wimber, the American Charismatic evangelist, for the influence he exerted at HTB on a previous visit. He describes how Wimber operated through 'words of knowledge', and tells a story about a woman who came forward after Wimber asked about somebody who was barren. The woman came forward and
John Wimber prayed for her. He put his hand on her head and commanded the healing power of God. Nine months later the lady gave birth to a beautiful baby boy and after that they had four more children.

Millar's theology underpinning 'ministry' comprises a series of proof-texts from Luke's Gospel. Again here is an attempt to recapture what Millar believes to have been present in the early church but which has got lost in the institutionalisation of religion. He then moves on to the practicalities of ministry, talking about models of conducting this ministry. He says you have to find a model that fits with the sort of people we are and which gives God the opportunity to do the work that only he can do. He then talks about truthfulness in our ministry and in our relationships. He refers to people who say: "Well you have prayed for me but I don't feel any better" and suggests praying for them "again and again and again." The pressure this must exert on the individual to come up with some kind of healing can only be guessed at. To remain unhealed may be experienced as defying God's will. Millar encourages people to build on God's promises - to have them "up their sleeve". There then follows another series of proof texts which the leaders should have "up their sleeve" to use appropriately. Millar blames the lack of miraculous healings evident in the church at large on the lack of belief of senior people within the church:

The church is riddled with unbelief. I don't think that's too strong a word for it. We appoint unbelievers. Some of the most senior positions in the church. Somehow we've got it into our heads that unbelief can be venerated. It has a sort of worldly wisdom and sense of reasonableness - that sort of stuff.
(Ministry video, 1999).

Millar launches this attack on the hierarchy of the church while at the same time using his title 'Prebendary' - which is posted across his picture on the video - presumably to give weight to what he says. He seems to want to use the authority given to him by the church to attack the legitimacy of those who gave him that very authority. At the same time he says: "We try to be watchful, not to criticise other Christians."

Millar describes how individuals are to be prayed with and for in the Ministry Time:

One, two or three people praying with somebody. One person should take the lead and be seen to do so. I have about four questions I ask: 'When did you give your life to Christ?' That's much less threatening than to ask if they've ever given their life to Christ. They then reveal their basic theology. They may say: 'I don't use that kind of language' or 'I used to be in the Crusaders' or 'I don't think I ever have.'
(Ministry video, 1999).
What this appears to do is to impose a particular understanding of what it is to be a Christian on the subject. Another question asked is: "Have you ever prayed to be filled with the Spirit?" Millar says it helps them (HTB) to understand where they (the subject) stand on these issues. Then the pray-er should follow up with: "Would you like me to pray that you should be filled with the Holy Spirit?"

This is really to be corralled into a particular closed theological discourse. One would have to think very quickly to come up with an answer which affirmed one's Christian belief whilst at the same time distancing oneself from this particular theological understanding of what it is to be a Christian. An Anglican may wish to refer to his or her baptism and Confirmation as being the points at which the presence of the Holy Spirit in his or her life was invoked and confirmed, and that giving one's life to Christ is a lifetime's work, begun at baptism and publicly initiated at Confirmation, though it is doubtful whether this would be a sufficient answer to satisfy Millar.

Millar suggests that we [the leaders] keep our eyes open while we pray for them. We will actually see physical signs of the Spirit on them:

As you pray for someone you often begin to see signs of the Spirit on them....
The young man who gave the prophetic word last night had so many of the signs of the Spirit on him which were clearly visible.....
You can get to recognise some of the physical symptoms: eyes beginning to flutter, a sort of glow coming upon them, a sense that the Spirit is at work in them. So watch them, keep your eyes on them and ask what God wants you to say to them. Say: 'I think God may be wanting to say something to you along these lines.' (Ministry video, 1999).

To speak on behalf of God, if the subject believes it, is to wield tremendous power over another person. Clearly, the possibilities of abuse, deception (of self or others) are very great. How one is to distinguish between symptoms of a heightened emotional state and symptoms of divine possession is not clear.

Millar warns that those who have recently been prayed for may suffer from increased temptation. He gives an example of a young man who came back from the Alpha Weekend and had hardly been home for ten minutes when the telephone rang:

This was an old girlfriend who never did him any good at all before he became a Christian ringing up again after three or four years. But it was so obvious to him that the enemy [the Devil] was up to his tricks and plans to drag him back to his old life and mercifully he'd been warned that this kind of thing might happen, so he said, "Thank you very much but not at the moment."

(Ministry video, 1999).
There is an extraordinary theology here, that makes this young woman at the other end of the telephone line into an agent of the enemy - the Devil. She may have telephoned hoping for a reconciliation, perhaps from the best of motives; but in this construction of reality an individual can be so much in thrall to the Devil that she can be made to act in a precise way, such as making a telephone call. To maintain this construction it is evidently best not to enquire too much into her own story; better to put the receiver down.

Millar talks about "collecting words of knowledge" at the evening of ministry, "often from very young Christians. We ask the Lord: 'Please give us words of knowledge.'" Millar says this in a very matter-of-fact way, confident that it will produce different medical complaints from different parts of the room. What he seems to be saying is that different individuals will be able to say something about the needs of others who are there, apparently by divine insight. So different people will hear different words of knowledge in different parts of the room. Millar brushes over this with little explanation, as if it were all perfectly natural and to be expected:

Then we try to put together the words of knowledge with people, and then we ask someone who has responded to a word of knowledge to come to the front and we get two people to pray for them. We get them to stand there or sit there, ask them their names, put our hands on them, pray for them.

(Ministry video, 1999).

In a recent article about "Faith Ministry", Stephen Hunt makes some observations about 'words of knowledge' which are also applicable to their use on Alpha:

It is through these "words" that God is believed to speak directly to and empower His people. Uttered by those in leadership positions, and sometimes by members of the congregation, they are meaningful to those who ascribe to a supernatural world view. For Walker, 'words of knowledge' are likely to be what he calls "simple hit-and-miss-affairs" (Walker, 1993). Put another way, what is spoken may, or may not, strike a chord with an individual in a congregation. Commonly, in the healing meetings of such Faith ministries as the Reachout International, someone will respond and give the "word" meaning and significance by claiming that it is applicable to them.

(Hunt, 2000, p.80).

Hunt suggests that, for those who do not subscribe to this kind of supernatural world view, there may be a psychological rather than metaphysical explanation for the phenomenon:

Cross-cultural studies have indicated that within the context of spiritual healing something akin to 'words of knowledge' are often
used at collective gatherings. The alleged divine 'message' is sufficiently diffuse and general, when spoken in authority by the healer/preacher, as to appeal to a whole variety of types of distress and sickness (Beecher, 1973). In this way, 'words of knowledge' bear a remarkable similarity to a technique used by experimental psychologists in studying both personal memory and imagery. Through such a technique, the researcher presents a word to the subject with the instruction to think of a specific memory associated with each word (Brewer, 1976).

Hunt also suggests that the 'words of knowledge' have a therapeutic function quite apart from the healing of physical ailments. They help individuals to consolidate their world-view and thus make the world a less bewildering place:

These 'words' have significance to the collective ethos and the individual's life-experience. Purpose and design are attributed to them. They are signs and symbols of the benevolence and nearness of God. In the case of the healing meeting in the church under study, 'words of knowledge' range over the many related concerns of the congregation and are an important means in aiding individuals to piece their world together, to confirm, explain, and make the world accountable.

If Hunt is right, then a steady diet of such miraculous occurrences may be required to sustain this belief in the 'benevolence and nearness of God.' Thus there is a dependence on Alpha. Where there is not this continuity, disillusion may set in. Certainly, failure must not be permitted:

Sometimes no one will respond to a word of knowledge. This is usually explained in terms of individuals being unaware that they have that particular sickness.

Hunt considers why people should subject themselves to this kind of experience, and suggests that there may be an "exchange" taking place whereby they "place themselves in a potential position of vulnerability and manipulation" so as to receive in return the security of group identity:

The individual will conform to group norms according to what s/he perceives the benefit from it will be....

Healing meetings should...be primarily understood as comprised of a self-selected group of people all with similar notions of the supernatural, common beliefs and values, who are gathered in the same environment.

(Hunt, 2000, p.83).
Because all participants have already accepted the necessary beliefs regarding the supernatural, there will be little resistance to, or scepticism concerning anything that happens:

Individuals present themselves in this context as willing believers of all that apparently happens or is claimed to occur. Hence, what follows in the meeting must inevitably be ‘true’. There is little scope for reflexive analysis concerning any resulting phenomena. (Hunt, 2000, p.83).

Hunt is clear that any individual who finds him or herself in this situation will face pressure to conform (despite Alpha's insistence that there is no pressure); and little ‘reflexive analysis’ means little opportunity for genuine exploration.

An Alpha Conference

HTB regularly puts on two-day training conferences for those who intend to lead Alpha courses in their own churches. The advertisements for it in every edition of Alpha News quote Nicky Gumbel: “Running Alpha without going to a Conference is like driving a car without lessons”.

I attended one such conference at HTB on the 16th and 17th November 2000.

The first session began with twenty minutes of non-stop worship songs, creating an enthusiastic atmosphere and sense of unity of belief and purpose amongst all who were there. Sandy Millar's talk continued this positive mood by speaking of his church “teeming with young people”, making it clear that “Alpha is the answer”, that it is intended for “people who never go near a church” and that “the Holy Spirit has adopted it.”

Nicky Gumbel then took over, praising Millar's work, and demonstrating by shows of hands the international make-up of the people who had come on the course (approximately 350). He then prayed for “a demonstration of the Spirit's power”, before bringing on his wife, Pippa, who said a few words. Gumbel also attempted to make clear the success of Alpha by quoting the numbers of courses being run, the number of countries where it could be found, and the number of church leaders from different denominations who had endorsed it. He emphasised that it was a course aimed at people who were not Christians. He said the course “needs to be run at least three times a year”, “you need to do it at least nine times to get the feel of it” and it takes “four or five years to break through into the community.” Clearly this would require an enormous commitment in terms of time, personpower and resources. It would totally dominate a church's life. Certainly, in all my interviews, I never came a cross a single church which had achieved this goal, even amongst the most committed (see Chapter Eight).
Gumbel wants every church to do it: "The more checkouts the more customers." Gumbel sees the church's task primarily as recruiting new members to its ranks. Other Christian leaders, however, may not see the church's task so much in terms of recruitment of individuals as of the transformation of society as a whole, and the Christian's calling to be salt and light in the world to facilitate that transformation. For Gumbel the aim appears to be not so much to transform society as to draw people out of the fallen world into this new society which is quite separate.

Richard Holloway, a former Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, in his *Doubts and Loves* (2001), has written about this way of looking at the church's task, which he calls a "theology of death":

> The theology of death is based on a concept of redemption or rescue. (Holloway, 2001, p.237).

In this theology:

> We are not where we truly belong, but are held in a captivity from which we cannot escape. The work of the Church is to rescue us. (Holloway, 2001, p.238).

> Its job is to free as many hostages as it can from the clutches of the evil one, and get them on board the ship of safety. So the Church becomes a lifeboat, launched to fish as many people as it can from the sea of destruction. (Holloway, 2001, p.239).

Holloway says this theology is based on "anxiety":

> We become anxious not only to avoid actions that may lead to eternal damnation; we become anxious about believing the wrong things or holding the wrong views; and sound doctrine becomes a life or death affair. (Holloway, 2001, p.239).

It also creates churches which are exclusive:

> Religious anxiety of this sort always hates the devil more than it loves God. It creates Churches that are exclusive in their self-understanding, and proclaim that there is no salvation outside their walls. (Holloway, 2001, p.240).

Though not writing specifically about *Alpha*, Holloway's description of a religious 'package' resonates with existing critiques of *Alpha* (see Chapter Six):
Theologies of anxiety have considerable strengths. The main one is the coherence of the system they proclaim. Once we accept the premises on which the message is based, the logic is powerful and persuasive. It can be learnt easily and taught effectively. It is, essentially, a product, a package that can be explained to the sales force. (Holloway, 2001, p.240).

Gumbel is quite amenable to the word ‘packaging’ but does not use the word ‘package’ to describe what is being offered. He said that there is “a duty to change the packaging” of the message for the present generation. Part of the old outdated packaging he sees as organ music. (Interestingly, the guitar and drum music which was on offer at the HTB conference - presumably an attempt to utilize contemporary culture - could be regarded as thirty years out of date. The rapid change in pop music fashion would make it extremely difficult even for HTB to keep up).

One of the criticisms of the Alpha version of Christianity is that it pays little attention to the transformation of society or what might be termed the ‘social gospel’. Monica Furlong made this point in her book (Furlong, 2000) and a French Roman Catholic priest present at the Conference also asked: “Is not conversion also about the transformation of society?” This seems to be a criticism to which HTB has become sensitive. Gumbel emphasised the importance of social action but gave little evidence of it. Millar talked about Alpha in prisons. In response to the French priest, Millar talked about individual acts of charity (“painting poor people’s homes”), and Gumbel talked about individual conversions in prisons. He then took this as a cue to introduce an ex-prisoner who gave his testimony.

Gumbel talked about “power evangelism” found in the New Testament. He had a sideswipe at theologians in general but said that they are all agreed that the central theme of the gospel is the Kingdom of God - “teaching, preaching and healing.” Gumbel emphasised the “healing” and quoted a number of proof-texts in support. He sees the healing miracles as demonstrations of God’s power which can be repeated today at HTB and elsewhere. However, not everyone sees such a direct correspondence between Jesus’s healings in the Gospels and the healings that take place at HTB and similar gatherings. Martyn Percy notes that Jesus’s healings almost always took place outside the community of faith. They tended to be "poor, voiceless, marginalized, or despised within society":

In virtually every healing story (and there are over forty in the Gospels) the person healed is politically, socially or religiously disadvantaged - unloved or unnoticed by the majority of onlookers or witnesses. The Gospel miracles, then, are a record of Christ reaching out to those marginalized, dispossessed, cursed in society and cast out from faith communities. (Percy, 1998, p.27).
Percy contrasts this with what happens today:

Evangelists and healers who offer ministry usually do so in the context of a church or faith-gathering. The ministry on offer is inward-looking, intended for those who join or become members; it largely leaves the dispossessed and marginalized of society alone. Frequently, those who claim to be healed already possess significant social, moral or religious status. (Percy, 1998, p.28).

Percy believes that the healing miracles in the Gospels were signs of God's love for the oppressed, not demonstration of God's power:

To focus on repeating miracles as demonstrative acts of power for today misses the original context and target of Jesus's healings, which had radical political, social and religious dynamics that were usually missed in their day, but should not be ignored now. (Percy, 1998, p.31).

Percy also observes how Jesus somehow seems to take on the suffering and affliction of those he cures, for example risking ritual contamination through touching. But at a deeper level, Percy utilizes Moltmann's insight into the crucified Christ who should be placed at the centre of our theology of healing. The brokenness of Christ is central to the gospel. This contrasts with the modern healing movement, where:

The emphasis is usually on Christ's strength and his ability to accomplish all things. Those who are afflicted must lose what afflicts them before they can join the company of the redeemed; that same company will certainly not be joining them, descending to their level. (Percy, 1998, p.34).

Gumbel recounted stories of various healings that have taken place at HTB, including his own athlete's foot, under the direction of John Wimber. Wimber prayed, "more power Lord", "and the power increased!"

Having verbally created the expectation of miraculous healings, he did the same visibly. Gumbel led an extempore prayer during which the band of musicians entered, boxes of tissues were placed on the platform steps and the prayer ministry team put on badges and moved to the front. The stage was set. Sandy Millar then told us to hold our hands out in front of us, such that, despite the claims of 'no pressure', anyone not holding their hands out would immediately have felt exposed. The psychological pressure to conform was strong. I was standing about three rows from the front at this point, and the woman in front of me started to move in an agitated fashion, eager for the right cue to come forward. We waited for the Holy Spirit to come, according to Millar's instruction, but nothing happened, so the
criteria-threshold was lowered: “If you've lost your first love for the Lord.” Some who were clearly bursting to come forward took this as their cue. Hands were laid on them and they were prayed for by the prayer team.

In his guidance about how to run the Holy Spirit Weekend, Gumbel emphasised how important it was to discuss speaking in tongues in groups before lunch, prior to experiencing it in the evening. It was important that speaking in tongues should seem perfectly normal. He said that people change on the Weekend. They talk about their feelings, and there may be tears: “The Holy Spirit brings to the surface what has been going on in their lives.” There should be an informal service of Holy Communion.

Gumbel, apparently again responding to a common criticism, claimed that they do teach about the sacraments but admitted it is limited because different denominations are represented, so “we stick to the things upon which we are all agreed.” In reality this seems to mean sticking to the things upon which all Charismatic Evangelicals are agreed, some of which may apply to other traditions as well. Yet the parts upon which "we" are most evidently not agreed (like speaking in tongues and miraculous cures) are given the greatest emphasis. He advises that teaching on subjects like baptism and the eucharist should be done on an individual church's supplementary course, thus relegating them to the periphery, when many churches would want to give them a much higher priority.

Gumbel related other stories of miraculous divine intervention in what might be seen as trivial matters, like the exact amount of money being raised to pay for a weekend away. This inspired laughter from the clearly already-convinced audience, not at the trivial nature of the example but at how ridiculous it would be to suppose that it was not God's direct intervention. Much of the humour on the course was of this kind, i.e. we who know the obvious truth of God's workings, laughing at the blindness of all those outside who don't see it. This did create a feeling of solidarity with one another and separateness from the world outside. Out there we may be an irrelevant and slightly eccentric minority, but in here we are with people like us who know the truth.

Gumbel again emphasised that Alpha does not work if you cut out any of the teaching on the Holy Spirit. He acknowledged that some want to omit the speaking in tongues, but he won't allow it:

Tongues is often the first gift that new Christians experience, and Alpha is a beginner's course.

Again, there is no recognition here that although tongues may be a beginner's gift in some versions of Christianity, it is by no means regarded as such universally. But users of Alpha must not modify it:

Our advice to churches is to follow the recipe. It has been refined over twenty-three years.
Gumbel then displayed a whole plethora of books and videos which churches "following the recipe" would need to purchase to do it properly.

Despite all these resources, Gumbel acknowledged that *Alpha* has a 20-30 percent drop-out rate, though blame for this, one way or another, was placed on the individuals who dropped out rather than on what was on offer. Also, given the number of people on a course who are already involved in the life of the church and are team leaders, helpers etc., it is easy to recognise Hunt's point that as a tool for evangelism it attracts few new people (Hunt, 2001). Neither does Gumbel give any statistics for how long any remaining new converts stay with the church. A negative effect of this drop-out rate on the mission of the wider church is that those who reject *Alpha* may well believe (as they have been told) that they are rejecting the whole of Christianity rather than just one expression of it.

A number of seminars were held during the Conference. I attended one on prayer, along with about forty-five others. The teaching was all underpinned by a very mechanistic and rather primitive and manipulative theology. Prayer was about asking for things, and getting God to answer. Proof texts from Genesis, 2 Chronicles, and Joel were used to demonstrate that answers to prayer are "conditional", "prayer works", and, "The more we pray, the better our *Alpha* course will be." All the talk was of extempore prayer as the only authentic kind. This theology has no room for written prayers or silent prayer. Prayer here is always about asking for something, there is no sense of prayer as communing with God. Again, this is one view of prayer being presented as the Christian view of prayer.

In another session, on running the small groups, Gumbel described these as providing a safe environment. The group leader should ask: "What do you think?", "What do you feel?". He should aim to get them frustrated by his reluctance to give an answer himself. The helpers in the group are to say nothing. The only exception is to answer technical questions and to give a summary of the discussion at the end. It is again evident that the function of these groups is to give some people a chance to air their feelings, but there is little help available for people with genuine questions.

Gumbel suggested that, at the first session, the group leader should try to get the person who is likely to be the most negative to speak first, and to try to get him to be as negative as possible, then people will follow suit, otherwise people will simply voice their Christian credentials ("I used to sing in the choir", "I used to go to Sunday School" etc.). This is clearly designed to make any later change appear even more dramatic. Gumbel said: "Wait till the Weekend", because people who claim to be Christians at the beginning will change that after the Weekend. They will say they weren't proper Christians, but they are now.

I put this apparent manipulation to Nicky Gumbel when I interviewed him (see Chapter Eight), and he did acknowledge that people's claims to be Christian did not always match what he understood a Christian to be. Gumbel is really challenging.
the legitimacy of anyone’s claim to be a Christian who does not conform to HTB’s particular model. The process therefore appears to be, at least to some extent, the conversion of individuals from one type of Christianity to another rather than an opportunity for anyone to explore the meaning of life. This suggestion is pursued further in Chapters Eight and Nine.

Gumbel said that by week eight it is important for everyone to have prayed out loud because week nine is ‘Ministry’ week and they will be praying for each other out loud. So the time for exploration and questions is clearly over by this stage. One is either on board or will have left. Gumbel advised the leader to use a simple prayer, then the guests will think they can do better. One of the leaders or helpers should deliberately not pray so that no-one feels embarrassed by not praying. The leader should not pray for everything - rather he is to let them pray. Each member is clearly to be led down a well-trodden path, carefully designed to avoid pitfalls on the way into full membership. Again, this seems to be not so much an exploration as a carefully planned induction into a narrowly defined form of Christianity. People either buy into the whole scheme or they leave. There is no room for diversity or for questioning. This is rather different from the advertised "Opportunity to Explore the Meaning of Life". Gumbel is also only too well aware of peer group pressure and the need to maintain the feeling that one is part of a group, when reality back in the outside world begins to cast doubts upon what has been experienced on the tightly-knit and insulated Weekend. He said that people need five or six key Christian friends to keep them Christian and counterbalance non-Christian friends. In this type of theology the lines of demarcation are clearly drawn between those who are on the inside, and those who are outside, and one must not allow oneself to be influenced by the latter.

Sandy Millar led a session on Ministry during the conference. This was very similar to the Ministry video-taped talk discussed above. Millar defined ‘Ministry’ as "the moment you move to lay hands on somebody." This is clearly a much narrower definition than the way the word is popularly understood within the wider church, namely to describe everything the church does. Millar described "Words of Knowledge" as taught by John Wimber (see above). He defined a Word of Knowledge as “a sense supernaturally that God gives you.” He said: “Theologians don’t like it, but our theology is tempered by our experience. Theologians tell us that God doesn’t do that (healing).” Millar’s clear distaste for theologians may be leading him to misrepresent them. Do they really pronounce what God does or doesn’t do? It may rather be that theologians are more likely to point out the implications of that sort of understanding of how God acts in the world. The problem is not so much God intervening in this way, as God not intervening everywhere else. Millar again used an uncritical, direct application of selected portions of scripture: Jesus healed, the disciples healed, so we should heal. We should accept the power that God wants to give us. We should be “humming and fizzing and seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Millar extends this first-century world view to the causes of illness: “Some of it may be demonic.” He went on to tell a story about a rash promise he made to heal someone’s headache. He believes God then took pity on his embarrassing situation and effected a cure.
This raises questions about the sort of God it is who saves Millar from an embarrassing situation yet lets others suffer perhaps after years of praying for relief. Again, the claimed miracle is invisible and therefore unverifiable by a third party. The miracles recorded in the Gospels which Millar claims to be imitating were much more overt and verifiable, e.g., the healing of a leper (Luke 5 vs 12-13), a man with a withered hand (Luke 6 vs 6-10) and Malchus's ear (Luke 22 vs 50-51). This is to make no comment on how these passages are to be understood, but merely to question Millar’s claim to similarity.

As in the videoed talk (see above), Millar denounced the "unbelief" with which the Church of England is "riddled". Being "full of faith" is about laying hands on people, and individuals are to be questioned in such a way so as to determine whether they share HTB's version of Christianity, e.g.: “Have you ever prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit?” The leader must face the subject for whom he is praying and “see signs of his (the Holy Spirit) coming. You can see signs on people’s faces: a glow, eyelids beginning to flutter.... Ask: ‘Is there anything happening?’” Despite denials, there is clearly pressure on the subject to come up with the desired response.

At a session entitled, "Integrating Alpha Into The Church", Millar described Alpha as "the evangelisation programme of the church". The use of the first definite article is significant here. It implies universal acceptance; a new orthodoxy. There is no room for alternatives. He believes it is “changing the face of the nation.”

Millar also echoed the moral agenda which Monica Furlong identified (see above), criticizing legislation permitting "abortion, euthanasia and cloning" out of hand. He regards these as "Original Sin" and says that it should be the bible which decides the rightness or wrongness of these issues, not scientists. Millar would never concede that his is only one interpretation of the bible, nor that other Christians might reach different conclusions. It is difficult to see how such a prescriptive, dogmatic and tightly defined programme could ever be a realistic interpretation of Alpha’s claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.

The theological issues described above, the way in which the course operates in practice, and the faith commitments of the membership of the course as it has run in two Anglican deaneries are examined in Parts Three and Four of this thesis.
Chapter Six - Review of Four Critiques of *Alpha*

To date there have been three significant published critiques of the *Alpha* phenomenon, and one unpublished dissertation. The three published critiques are examined together, whilst the fourth, being of a rather different kind, is reviewed separately. None of them focus on *Alpha*'s educational claim of an 'exploration', but all have views about its methods and function. There have also been a number of other critiques written from within the Evangelical constituency for the latter's own internal audience where characteristic doctrinal assumptions are made, and hence these have not been examined here. One example, written from an extreme Protestant fundamentalist position, would be Elizabeth McDonald and Dusty Peterson's, *Alpha - the Unofficial Guide: Overview* (St Matthew, 2001). They criticize Nicky Gumbel for conceding that other religions than Christianity may contain some element of truth, when in fact they all have their source in Satan (see p.8), for placing insufficient weight on the “lake of fire” (p.68) which awaits unbelievers, for being too friendly towards the Roman Catholic Church which is “idolatrous” (p.28) and they conclude that *Alpha* is actually an introduction to pagan “New Age” religion (p.151).

In the wider arena, the most significant critique published so far is Stephen Hunt’s book, *Anyone for Alpha* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001). Hunt is currently a lecturer in the department of sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. In his Introduction he sets out the purposes of his book:

> It explores the background and working philosophy of *Alpha* and asks the following questions. Who put it together and why? What kind of Christianity is being advanced? What does its working philosophy tell us about the changes which have recently taken place within the Christian Church? The following chapters also attempt to find out what kind of people sign up for an *Alpha* course, what initially attracts them, and what their experiences are. More widely, it explores how *Alpha* works on the ground - in the local church. Then there are perhaps the ultimate questions to be addressed. Does *Alpha* work? Is it winning converts? Does it transform people's lives - or at least set them on a spiritual road, as it professes to do?
> (Hunt, 2001, p.xv).

Hunt's methods were as follows:

For an eighteen-month period, extending from 1998 through to 1999, I interviewed a number of clergymen and church leaders running *Alpha* at the local level as well as several dozen individuals who had enrolled for the course and asked them, and some 400 other lay people, to fill in questionnaires. I also experienced *Alpha* first hand, having sat in on a number of courses in churches from different denominations (p.xv).
There is some common ground between Hunt's research and my own, including coincidentally some overlap in the geographical area in which our respective fieldwork was conducted, but there are also significant differences in our areas of interest and in our interpretation of findings. These similarities and differences become apparent in the text (but see also my Rationale in the Introduction above). Probably the most obvious difference is Hunt's admission that his interest is primarily sociological rather than educational or theological. Also, it is written by an "agnostic outsider" (p. xvi) whose concerns are primarily academic, whereas mine, as a minister of religion and theological educator, are both academic and professional.

The other two published critiques are articles. The slightly more substantial of the two is Pete Ward's, *Alpha - The McDonaldization of Religion?* (Anvil, Vol 15, No.4, pp.279-286, 1998). At the time of writing his article, Ward was the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advisor in Youth Ministry, and a lecturer at King's College, London.

Though appearing first in Anvil, an Evangelical theological journal, Ward's article reached a wider church audience when it was published in the Church Times on 8th January 1999. It attracted criticism in the Church Times letters page in the two subsequent editions. Perhaps aware of the criticism his article would attract, particularly being an Evangelical himself, he prefaces his remarks with the assurance that he believes that "God is at work" (Ward, 1998, p.279) in *Alpha*, and repeats the assurance later. This prompted one correspondent to write that Ward should have the courage of his convictions:

*Alpha* is not the gospel. He [Ward] states, "In this scenario it has to be said that McDonaldized evangelism lacks a significant theology of the cross." St Paul makes it very clear that any version of the gospel that is deficient in this respect is anathema. Ergo, God is not at work.

His weak claim that God is supposed to be at work is never substantiated: that thousands of *Alpha* courses go on is no proof that anyone is being saved, any more than the fact that thousands of slimming courses are held is proof that people are actually losing weight.


Ward describes his paper as "an attempt to describe the cultural characteristics of *Alpha.*" He takes Ritzer's analysis of society developed in his *The McDonaldization of Society*, (New York, Pine Forge Press, 1996) and applies it to *Alpha*, asking if *Alpha* is the 'McDonaldization' of religion.

The third published critique is Martyn Percy's article, *Join-the-dots Christianity - Assessing Alpha*, Reviews in Religion and Theology, pp.14-18, 1997/3. This article itself provoked a response from Markus Bockmuehl ('Dotty Christianity -
Assessing Percy on Alpha, Reviews in Religion and Theology, pp.10-12, 1997/4). Martyn Percy is Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute and a lecturer at the University of Manchester. Markus Bockmuehl is a lecturer at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.

Percy makes three criticisms of Alpha: firstly, its failure to present the church as the body of Christ; secondly, its relentless appeal to basics which ignore the breadth of Christianity; and thirdly, its overemphasis on the Holy Spirit.

The fourth and unpublished critique is Mark Ireland’s dissertation, available through the Lichfield Diocesan website (www.lichfield.anglican.org.uk), entitled: A Study Of The Effectiveness Of Process Evangelism Courses In The Diocese Of Lichfield, With Special Reference To Alpha. It forms part of the requirement for an MA in Evangelism Studies, University of Sheffield at Cliff College, 2000. Mark Ireland is Diocesan Missioner for Lichfield Diocese.

Hunt declares early on in his book that "perhaps the principal attraction of Alpha is that it explicitly sets out not to pressurise" (Hunt, 2001, p.15), although this is contradicted later by some of those he interviewed:

A fairly frequent response that I have received from a few clergymen was the belief that it pressurises people. In other words, it is not softly-softly enough and, more sinisterly, manipulates people through ten weeks of systematic indoctrination. Alpha, therefore, becomes cult-like. Hence, there is a fairly captive audience that is subject to the ‘feel-good factor’ of food and attention, the Charismatic leader who instructs an unquestionable message, and the pressure to conform and accept the unconditional set of beliefs.

(Hunt, 2001, p.46).

The evidence of some of my own interviews (see Chapter Eight), the guidance given in the Alpha training manual and Sandy Millar’s guidance in his ‘Ministry’ video (see Chapter Five), similarly point to subtle yet powerful pressure to conform. Also, the fact of isolation at the Holy Spirit Weekend (Holy Trinity Brompton’s advice is that this should take place at a venue away from the home church) makes it difficult to maintain reserve in a community where one is part of a minority rather than a majority. This psychological pressure to conform (as in Millar’s instruction to "hold out your hands" to welcome the Spirit) is examined further in Chapter Five.

Hunt states that "the principal rationale behind the initiative is to encourage people to raise issues about the Christian faith" (Hunt, 2001, p.16) and that "ultimately, Alpha should be judged by what it claims to do. It presents itself as an opportunity to explore Christianity" (Hunt, 2001, p.119). Hunt is wrong here. The Alpha website, the posters and all the literature present Alpha not as an opportunity to explore Christianity (which would probably have little appeal to the general public who would see it simply as a church activity) but as an opportunity to explore the
meaning of life. This difference is important. HTB is hoping that this offer will appeal at a much deeper level to the person on the street. The significance of the difference is apparent from my own research in which members of the public with no particular religious affiliation (though some were, incidentally, churchgoers) were asked what they would expect from any course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and how they would feel if they arrived at such a course only to find that just one option - that of Christianity - was on offer. Hunt's big question - asked of 'guests' on the course rather than people outside - was rather different from mine. It was: "What issue related to Christianity would you most wish an Alpha course to address?" (Hunt, 2001, p.76). Some of the responses, however, were similar to mine. His were: the issues of Suffering, Other Religions, Sex before Marriage, Homosexuality, Faith and Science, Contradictions between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New, Other Theological Questions, and Miscellaneous. Mine, being addressed to a sample of people drawn from the general public, unsurprisingly omitted the more internal Christian theological and moral issues, and came up with, in order of popularity: Life after Death, Suffering, Many Religions, Why Are We Here?, Existence of God, Religion and Science, Problem of Evil, and Miscellaneous (see Chapter Eight).

The claim of the Alpha literature (and of Nicky Gumbel himself, interviewed during the course of my research - see Chapter Eight) is that the 'exploration' element occurs in the group discussion during which any issue can be raised. However, nothing raised in the groups has any influence on the content of the talks which move relentlessly in a particular direction and to a particular conclusion. There is no dialogue with the speaker and hence with the content of the course. One either accepts what is on offer or leaves. Martyn Percy also criticizes the way in which Alpha sets its own questions and then offers the answers. He suggests, "there is little space for people actually to reflect and vent their own serious social, personal, moral or theological concerns" (Percy, 1997, p.16). Group leaders are not equipped to respond usefully to such questions, and the speaker on the video (Gumbel) is not accessible. Hunt observes that since most people on the Alpha courses he researched were already converted, people tended to agree with each other in the discussion groups and there was an embarrassing uniformity. He also notes that although Gumbel sees the groups as the place where people can raise the difficult questions, in practice they often didn't get much help. Hunt quotes one group leader:

I think that it must happen regularly that people ask questions in the hope that someone will enlighten them, but they remain none the wiser. This happened with us. It can sometimes be a bit like the blind leading the blind. (Hunt, 2001, p.91).

My own research (see Chapter Eight) suggests that the main function of the group is therapeutic rather than a forum in which difficult questions can be addressed. Those who do have serious questions may leave in frustration. It suggests that Alpha does not address the questions which ordinary men and women with no particular religious affiliation are asking, but rather tends to address its own internal Christian
questions, though some Christians who have started the course have found that even these are not the questions which concern them.

Hunt notes that *Alpha* uses the so-called "homogeneous unit principle", i.e. that "like attracts like": "People are most likely to be won over to a church constituted by people similar to themselves" (Hunt, 2001, p16). This is consistent with Martyn Percy's observation that in Evangelical ecclesiology the church is "a collection of people who are in agreement with one another" (Percy, 1997, p.15). Pete Ward also notes the "flattening" effect of *Alpha*, whereas "Christian theology is to say the least complex and varied". Ward is worried that it will "suppress creativity" and spread only a "uniform spirituality" (Ward, 1998, p.285). One version of Christianity, appealing to particular kinds of people, is being presented as Christianity itself. Thus, there is a danger that those individuals who find *Alpha* unsatisfying may leave the course believing that they have rejected the whole of Christianity rather than just one manifestation of it, and the evangelistic (and educational) mission of the church is damaged. (Hunt, incidentally, quotes Ward's thesis that *Alpha* could be seen as the McDonaldization of religion, but without acknowledgement [see Hunt, page 34]).

The homogenous unit principle, however, may also apply to the middle-class nature of *Alpha*. Percy sees a link between this and the pneumatology on offer:

> The Spirit on offer obviously arises from a personable, therapeutic, home-counties context that is concerned with the individual. The dynamics of the Spirit's work in creation, justice, peace, reconciliation and the wider church receive scant attention.

(Percy, 1997, p.15).

This, Percy sees as a reflection of the upper-middle class outlook of *Alpha*'s creators. There is no hint of the demands which the Gospel makes upon us.

Markus Bockmuehl points out that Percy contradicts himself in complaining that *Alpha* offers an "uncontextual" Christianity, but also a "home-counties context". In Percy's defence, it may be observed that he appears to be pointing out in the first case that *Alpha* offers a free-standing form of Christianity independent of any church, and that this is simply unrealistic. However, the dual use of the word "context" does leave him open to criticism.

Hunt discusses the roots of the Charismatic community and the influence on *Alpha* of the Willow Creek Community, John Wimber and the Toronto Blessing (see Chapter Two). He also notes the spread of *Alpha* across the denominations, leading to claims being made of *Alpha* being a unifying force. Certainly it is taking place in many denominations, both Protestant and Catholic, and has the endorsement of denominational church leaders. Such endorsements are published on the *Alpha* website and frequently appear in *Alpha* News. Hunt sees the significance of this as being "a measurement of the impact and spread of Charismatic Christianity" (Hunt, 2001, p.24). But the ecumenical claim of *Alpha* could actually be misleading. *Alpha* regards denominations as unimportant providing the doctrines and style of *Alpha* are accepted. The allegiances of Evangelical churches have always been to other
Evangelical churches before churches of their own denomination, but it could be argued that their own criteria for acceptance (penal substitution theory of atonement, individual conversion, conservative interpretation of scripture, particular teachings on the Holy Spirit, prayer, healing and other issues) are every bit as non-negotiable as those of a historic denomination. Percy also believes Alpha underestimates the theological substance of Christians’ ecclesial differences. They are not just cosmetic. They need to be taken seriously. He describes Alpha as a “confident but narrow expression of Christianity” (Percy, 1997, p.16). My research amongst clergy echoes that view (see Chapter Eight).

The Roman Catholic attitude towards Alpha appears to be rather more ambivalent. It is the only denomination which HTB has permitted to have its own form of Alpha. It has also set up ‘Alpha for Catholics’ conferences and an ‘Alpha for Catholics Office’ (based at All Saints Pastoral Centre, Westminster Diocese). The Alpha website and literature contain many endorsements of the course by Roman Catholic leaders, but Hunt claims that a handful of Roman Catholic bishops are believed to be quite seriously apprehensive about Alpha because of its origins within Protestantism. He concedes that about 400 Roman Catholic parishes in Britain are running Alpha programmes, but:

I frequently got the impression, however, that in many instances it was an unsupported fringe programme and was given the nod by some priests only because it could reverse Catholic Church membership decline and provided the opportunity to address traditional Catholic moral concerns, such as sex before marriage and the virtues of family life. My broad feeling was that there was a general foreboding about Alpha among at least some Roman Catholics.

(Hunt, 2001, pp.50&51).

My own research focusses purely on Church of England parishes, but Nicky Gumbel appears to have a particular concern to show Roman Catholic approval of Alpha, as illustrated and discussed in the analysis of my interview with him (see Chapter Eight).

Hunt notes that Holy Trinity Brompton itself could give a rather false impression of the impact of Alpha:

Today, Alpha at HTB is very impressive in terms of its scale and who attends. The church itself claims that most of those who sign up are not committed to the faith but are earnest seekers wishing to know more about Christianity. It may well be, however, that HTB is rather atypical - possibly because it has been running Alpha for far longer than other churches and has thus had sufficient time to perfect its strategy and establish wide networks of individuals who constitute Alpha fodder.

(Hunt, 2001, p.33).
It is also difficult to determine, of course, how many people who attend the course subsequently join the church and for how long. Richter and Francis (1998) make the point that in such large busy Evangelical churches the joining rate is high, but so is the leaving rate. Hunt's suggestion is borne out by Gumbel's own judgement about the sustained commitment required over a long period to make the course work. It also appears designed to create a new culture within the church in which the presence of Alpha is taken for granted.

Gumbel's assertion about repeated running of the course leading to results appears at first glance to be supported by research carried out in 1998 by Peter Brierley's Christian Research organisation on behalf of 'Springboard', an evangelism initiative set up by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1992. The research report was published in March 2001 in the form of a booklet entitled There Are Answers, written by Robert Warren and Bob Jackson. It deals with issues of church decline and looks at the effect of process evangelism courses, including Alpha. It concludes:

Churches which have done Alpha once or twice are no more likely to grow than churches which have not done Alpha - only 1 in 5 of both categories are growing. Churches which have done Alpha three or more times are more likely to grow - over a quarter are growing and 1 in 5 are holding steady. (Warren and Jackson, 2001, p.6).

Those who commissioned the report as well as the national and church press immediately assumed there was a causative link between running Alpha and church growth:

*Alpha* and other similar courses do help church growth, though only if repeated regularly. (Church Times, 23rd March 2001).

I telephoned Peter Brierley on 26th March 2001 to ask him if his research demonstrated a causative link between running Alpha courses and church growth. He conceded that it did not. It could just be, for example, that churches which have the energy, resources and commitment to run Alpha repeatedly are churches which are more likely to grow anyway.

Hunt reports that he often came across clergy who felt pressured to put on Alpha despite reservations about its Charismatic nature and potential divisions in the congregation which might be caused by it. My own research also found evidence of the question, 'Does your church do Alpha?' being a defining one. Pete Ward makes the point that running Alpha "is a badge of liveliness and identity" and if you want to be thought a 'lively' church you have to get your name on the list of registered courses published in Alpha News (Ward Interview, 2001).
Hunt came across the view that a postmodern society is something of an advantage for *Alpha*, because people are open to the idea of the supernatural and so are likely to be receptive to the activity of the Holy Spirit (Hunt, 2001, p.63). He also notes that *Alpha* "makes full use of sociological and psychological approaches and displays an understanding of contemporary culture and social change... and the importance of belonging" (Hunt, 2002, pp.111&112). My own research also considers the question 'Why now?' and advances the possibility that the certainties of Alpha may be one response from the church to the uncertainties of a postmodern world (see Chapter Two).

Hunt also discovered that in some cases Alpha had become not so much a means of evangelism as a pastoral tool for people with emotional and psychological problems. He describes these as 'Alphaholics' who do the course over and over again. Hunt says he understands that HTB encourages people to take the course again, but not for this reason. Hunt is half right on this latter point. Gumbel encourages some people to come back and do Alpha as a helper or group leader, but not simply to repeat the course. However, it does appear to be the case that when people are asked why they do Alpha and what they get out of it, they tend to speak of the warmth of the welcome and the bonds formed in the group rather than being introduced to the Christian faith, as my research indicates (see Chapter Eight).

Hunt detected few new converts on Alpha. Some were on the course because they had been invited and felt morally obliged to see it through even though they remained fairly sceptical, but the vast majority were already committed to the church in varying degrees. Gumbel would respond that the churches Hunt researched had simply not run Alpha often enough, but if the course has to be run twelve to fifteen times (see above) before it breaks out into the community, this raises questions about just how effective a tool for evangelism it is. And if it is the warmth of the fellowship and the meal together which attract people, does one really need a course anyway? Pete Ward says that even if only one person actually came to faith on the whole of a course then "that's one person God rejoices over" (Ward Interview, 2001) though one wonders if that one person would have come to faith if they had simply been invited to a meal with other Christians or had been invited along to participate in some other aspect of the church's life, Alpha aside. Percy, too, is sceptical about Alpha's reach beyond its own constituency. His 'hunch' is that Alpha ultimately "excites and galvanises existing believers", but that it is "more monologue than dialogue" and that it is selling a Gospel "that is independent of the church" (Percy, 1997, p.17). The copyright protection surrounding Alpha would appear to bear that out. It claims to contain the basics of Christianity, but is the property not of the church at large, but of Holy Trinity Brompton.

An important part of Hunt's research in trying to assess the effectiveness of Alpha is his discovery that the great majority who claimed, when asked, to have become Christians on the course, turned out, on further questioning, to have been already in the church. So if they were already an established part of the church, why were they claiming to have become Christians on Alpha? This is an important question if
numbers of such converts are being claimed as a measure of the success of Alpha. It is highly relevant to the sort of research conducted by Peter Brierley for Springboard (2001) and that conducted by Mark Ireland (2000). Ireland accepts such statistics of conversion uncritically.

Hunt thinks that "their claim to conversion may indicate a greater commitment to the faith" (Hunt, 2001, p.97). My own research suggests that, in some cases at least, they may have gone through a process of 'de-Christianizing' (see Chapter Four) whilst on Alpha, i.e. they have been persuaded by the teaching on the course that they were not proper Christians before, but they are now. The worrying aspect of this is the notion that there is only one way of being a Christian, and that is defined by Alpha. Hence, the Charismatic Evangelical tradition becomes the only authentically Christian tradition, and Alpha becomes the new orthodoxy.

This de-Christianizing process (though not named as such) is an integral part of the Alpha method. At the Alpha Conference I attended at HTB in November 2000 (see Chapter Five), Nicky Gumbel gave a talk on how to be an effective group leader and emphasised the importance of waiting for the Holy Spirit Weekend. The intention is that people who would have claimed at the beginning to have been Christian, but who have been encouraged instead to be sceptical, will say after the Weekend that they weren't proper Christians before, but they are now. Hence their 'conversion' and their testimony will be all the more powerful. I put the matter of these manufactured conversions to Gumbel in person when I interviewed him on 14th March 2001 (see Chapter Eight). His response was to cast doubt on the authenticity of the faith (prior to Alpha) of some who might claim to be Christians.

The crisis point for anyone taking an Alpha course is the Holy Spirit Weekend which takes place about halfway through the course. Hunt says that "it is not a compulsory part of the programme" (Hunt, 2001, p.99), but he is wrong here. Gumbel and Millar are quite insistent that it is an integral part of the course and should not be omitted:

It's better to run something different, than to change it and call it Alpha, because then it's misleading for those who are recommending it to their friends. If you say cut out the Weekend on the Holy Spirit and still call it Alpha and I look in the register and I've got a friend who lives in wherever it is, and, when they get there, and they say: "We didn't have a Weekend - I really didn't enjoy it", and I say, "They didn't have a Weekend?", that person feels cheated, shortchanged.... "But they said they were running an Alpha course...".

(Gumbel Interview, 2001).

Gumbel only reluctantly concedes that it may, if absolutely necessary, be reduced from a weekend to a day.
Hunt recognises both the attraction and foreboding that people feel towards the Weekend:

A weekend away from life's trials and tribulations, the opportunity for healing, and to be involved in what everybody else was involved in, was the attraction for quite a few. (Hunt, 2001, p.99).

The fear is that people are removed from their familiar environment and are subjected to indoctrination. (Hunt, 2001, p.100).

Hunt sees the fear of indoctrination as being largely unfounded, though there may be coercion. Hunt quotes one individual in particular who did speak of being "brainwashed" and "pressured" on a Holy Spirit Weekend (Hunt, 2001, p.101) and Hunt recognises the part played by "seclusion", "suggestibility", and the way in which it is assumed that speaking in tongues is part of the normal Christian experience (Hunt, 2001, p.103). He also discusses the influence of John Wimber on the 'Ministry Time' during the Weekend. My own research looks at all these issues.

Hunt criticizes the notion of Christianity being marketed as a "package" and that it "oversimplifies sophisticated critiques of Christianity and then destroys them" (Hunt, 2001, p.113). Percy, too, is worried about the "package of truth being sold" (Percy, 1997, p.15). Hunt feels that it is failing to win many new converts because there is no "consumer demand" for what it has to offer, and that it is middle-class "and appeals primarily to middle-class people" (Hunt, 2001, p.114), though Gumbel points out that this simply reflects the area in which Hunt did his research.

Hunt sums up the real function of Alpha as providing:

...a sense of belonging, identity and revival for those already converted, or [a means of bringing] backsliders into the fold. Alpha largely does this through a Charismatic form of Christianity.... Alpha's net effect is in extending Charismatic Christianity to the churches.... It spiritually invigorates those already in the churches. (Hunt, 2001, p.118).

Ward, in his analysis, takes Ritzer's McDonaldizing principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer, 1996) and explores whether Alpha can be similarly understood. Ward notes that the term 'efficiency' is hardly ever used by Alpha. Rather, it speaks of "effective evangelism" which has been "tried and tested." It is the sort of evangelism which "the local congregation can do" (Ward, 1998, p.281) because it "simplifies" religion. As far as "calculability" is concerned, Ward notes that both McDonalds and Alpha have a predilection for numbers. In the
case of *Alpha*, *Alpha* News is full of numbers of courses being run and numbers of people who have completed them. This is because "*Alpha* measures its success and presents itself for approval primarily on the basis of numerical success" (Ward, 1998, p.282). "Religion affected by McDonaldization measures both sin and salvation by numbers" (Ward, 1998, p.283).

On the subject of predictability, just as McDonalds aims to offer a consistent product in a familiar environment, *so Alpha* offers "a predictable experience of evangelism", and "Ronald McDonald is not far away when we look at the *Alpha* logo of the figure carrying a question mark. For the non-churchgoer this is experienced as non-threatening religion" (Ward, 1998, p.283). Also, just as every aspect of the production of a McDonalds hamburger is tightly controlled, so the *Alpha* material shows evidence of a significant level of control over the process of evangelism in the local church. The content of the talks, for example, is laid down in detail in *Questions of Life* (Gumbel, 1993) and the *Alpha* copyright statement defines the exact nature of the course very closely.

Ward suspects that the mere comparison of *Alpha* with McDonalds will, for some, imply criticism, but he is at pains to point out that he does see *Alpha* as a "significant contextualisation of the methods of evangelism." At the end of his article, however, he expresses a number of "points for concern" (Ward, 1998, p.285). He believes it offers "an experience of the faith which has a measure of unreality. Membership of a local church, regular Sunday worship and so on are simply not like *Alpha.*" Finally, he is concerned that the whole business of evangelism and mission in the local church "can so easily be reduced to running *Alpha.*" (Ward, 1998, p.286).

The week after Ward's article appeared in the *Church Times*, a letter from Sandy Millar was published in response. The letter focussed on the areas of difference between McDonalds and *Alpha* (hamburgers aren't healthy like *Alpha*, people shouldn't repeat *Alpha*, the copyright is to protect people rather than the product, it is not uniform because it involves different denominations, it has good effects on people's lives, etc.) rather than respond to the points that Ward makes. Most of the other letters simply re-stated what a good thing they thought *Alpha* was, again without really addressing Ward's criticisms. On the following week's letters page (CT 22/1/99) Michael Saward, a well-known Evangelical and Canon of St Paul's, praised Ward's critique, described important elements which he thought were missing from the course (Jesus as Suffering Servant, his Ascension, the announcement of the kingdom of God, a call to repentance, the Holy Spirit as "giver of life at work in the world", and adequate treatment of the Church) and expressed his disappointment that Sandy Millar could see no flaws in *Alpha*.

When I interviewed Pete Ward on 5th February 2001 (see Chapter Eight and Appendices 2 and 3)) and asked him about his article, he appeared stung by some of the criticism it had attracted. It had been published in the *Church Times* without his knowledge and he suddenly found himself contacted by national newspapers and radio stations. They were interested in his remarks not as an academic but as a
representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, even though the Archbishop had no involvement in the article. Following a discussion between Pete Ward and Nicky Gumbel at which Gumbel voiced his disapproval of the criticisms made in the article, Ward told me that if he re-wrote the article he "wouldn't write those bits" (Ward Interview, Feb 2001). I asked Ward if he would leave those criticisms out because he no longer agreed with them or because he felt they might upset people. He said they were "too clever... too slick". My own impression from interviewing Ward was that he had been affected by criticisms of the article in three ways.

Firstly, this article had clearly caused some embarrassment to the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose officer Pete Ward was. Secondly, Ward's repeated assertions in the article that he believed *Alpha* was "a work of God" point to his unease at writing an article critical of a phenomenon championed by the Evangelical constituency from which Ward himself came. On both counts, Ward's article could be seen as disloyal. Thirdly, Gumbel's strategy of 'befriending' critics, thus rendering their criticisms personal and disloyal rather than academic had clearly had an effect on Ward. During the course of my interview with him, he seemed to wish he had not written the article at all:

I now think that article is mistaken in that sense. I think (and this is probably because I haven't done an *Alpha* myself) that if I had done an *Alpha* myself I might have realised that this is not a bland McDonaldized environment that people come to. It's actually quite a rich environment, and that's why it's successful. (Ward Interview, Feb 2001).

At the beginning of Martyn Percy's article, he criticizes the lack of appreciation which Evangelicals have for "directional plurality" (Percy, 1997, p.15) - an unfortunately obscure phrase which probably means that the church contains people of more divergent views than *Alpha* recognises, but which Markus Bockmuehl attacks for being "pseudo-sociological jargon" (Bockmuehl, 1997, p.11).

More importantly, Percy wants to see a greater emphasis placed on "church and sacraments". However, it is difficult to see how a course intended to appeal to such a wide variety of denominations with different ecclesiologies and theologies of the sacraments could say anything significant without alienating some. The creators of *Alpha*, recognising this difficulty, have instead attempted to appeal to what they see as common ground, but in fact offer a Charismatic Evangelical ecclesiology and theology of sacraments while claiming universality.

Percy wants to know who chose these particular 'basics' which form the substance of *Alpha*’s version of Christianity ("an appeal to a largely inerrant Bible, attenuation of a homely and powerful Holy Spirit, and expression of an Evangelical atonement theory" (Percy, 1997)) and why these were selected rather than others. Percy is not, as Bockmuehl suggests, "curiously perturbed to find that an introductory course on Christian faith should be concerned with basics" (Bockmuehl, 1997, p.7) but rather questions this particular selection. They are actually the basics of a Charismatic Evangelical version of Christianity, selected by HTB, protected by copyright and
marketed as being the basics of Christianity itself. Percy prefers: "the Trinity, baptism, communion or community". Holy Trinity Brompton would respond that these are left out because they are divisive issues and ought to be tackled by individual churches later. Bockmuehl considers them "advanced", although one wonders why, for example, that most basic of all Christian practices, namely baptism, should be considered advanced.

Percy also notes that "people's previous experience of the church is deemed to be peripheral" (Percy, 1997, p.17). My own examination of the Alpha testimonies in particular bears this out (see Chapter Four). He also warns: "The danger of a therapeutically-tuned version of the Gospel that is intentionally socially relevant is that it will itself become a fashion victim" (Percy, 1997, p.17). The context of the phrase 'socially relevant' here indicates that what is meant is that the gospel message being proclaimed owes too much to contemporary popular culture, and is therefore too vulnerable to changes in that popular culture. Percy gives a string of examples ("Signs and Wonders", "Toronto Blessing", etc.) with a limited shelf-life. One might also add that the style of music recommended by HTB, despite its claims to be relevant to a younger generation, is already sounding dated. All these, like Alpha, are simply about "refreshing charismatic-evangelical identity" (Percy, 1997, p.18). Bockmuehl notices that while Percy criticizes Alpha for being "socially relevant" he (Percy) also says that Alpha has "no real social mandate", thus contradicting himself. Replaced in its context, however, the point of the latter is that the comfortable middle-class version of the gospel being offered is of little relevance in addressing the issues faced by people outside that particular culture.

Bockmuehl condemns Percy for his criticism of Alpha's placing of too much emphasis on atonement, while at the same time accusing it of being "weak on sin, atonement and sacrifice." He appears to have identified a real contradiction here, excepting only that Percy actually criticizes Alpha's specifically Evangelical atonement theory.

Bockmuehl's criticisms of Percy's article focus on specific contradictions in his text and his general style ("shooting from the hip") but sometimes rely on misrepresentation: "What exactly is his problem with the Alpha course, except perhaps that it introduces people to the Christian faith?" (Bockmuehl, 1997, p.10). Nowhere does Percy attack the principle of introducing people to the Christian faith, and indeed he suggests some of the important alternative aspects of Christianity which might be explored in such an introduction (e.g., the church as the body of Christ, the sacraments, the work of the Spirit in creation). What Percy is concerned about is the narrowness and rigidity of the particular version of Christianity on offer; issues which Bockmuehl does not address.

Bockmuehl also states that Percy "objects to the idea that people might come to faith as individuals on a minimum of basic doctrine, and only then grow into a church" (Bockmuehl, 1997, p.10). In fact, nowhere does Percy 'object' to such an idea; he rather points out that it is based on a misconception, namely that people are converted first, then think about joining a church. It is true that no statistical
evidence is given here, but the suggestion that people are more likely to continue in 
the life of their church if that is the place where they came to faith, than they are if 
they came to faith on a course which might bear little relation to the realities of the 
worshipping life of their local church, does not seem unreasonable.

Bockmuehl criticizes Percy's lack of evidence to support his assertion that "Alpha 
course converts often fail to become church members." Again, it is true that no 
evidence is given, though this is in keeping with the general rhetorical tone of the 
article which makes no claims to scholarly research, but is rather based on 
impressions - hence the use of words like "hunch" and "guess". Bockmuehl's article 
takes an uncritical attitude towards Alpha on the grounds that to offer something 
("some of the dots") is better than nothing, so long as it bears the title "Christian". 
Percy's concern, on the other hand, is that it does matter both what is being offered 
and what is being claimed in the name of Christian faith. However, both articles are 
rhetorical rather than scholarly in tone. The present study attempts to go beyond this 
to discover what is actually going on.

Mark Ireland's dissertation (Ireland, 2000) is rather different from the three 
critiques discussed above. It is a piece of quantitative research intended to discover 
the effectiveness of a number of process evangelism courses, in particular Alpha, 
based on the impressions of clergy running them in the diocese of Lichfield.

In his Abstract, Ireland describes his principal research method:

I sent out a questionnaire to all 426 parishes in the diocese [of 
Lichfield]. 85% replied. 61% of respondents were offering some 
form of process evangelism, of which the most popular were 
Alpha (used by 39%), Emmaus (24%) and Good News Down The 
Street (10%). In total 6,334 people had attended process 
evangelism courses, and 22% of these had come to Christian faith, 
commitment or confirmation. The percentage of people coming to 
faith through the three main courses was almost the same, but 
"own brand" courses averaged higher. 
(Ireland, 2000).

Ireland uses the phrase "come to faith" frequently during his dissertation as a 
principal criterion for measuring the success of Alpha, yet precisely what this means 
is never examined. In fact, Ireland at no point interviews any of the people who 
form his statistics; he relies solely on the impressions and reports of clergy who 
have put on the course, and who have therefore probably invested a great deal of 
time, energy and emotional capital in it, and are not simply disinterested observers. 
My research, and that of Stephen Hunt, both of which involve interviewing people 
who have been on Alpha courses, show that many of those who claim to have been 
converted on an Alpha course were in fact churchgoers already. As discussed above, 
Hunt thinks that "their claim to conversion may indicate a greater commitment to 
the faith" (Hunt, 2001, p.97), though my own research suggests that there may well 
be a process of "de-Christianizing" (see Chapter Four) going on. Also, the
characteristically Evangelical emphasis on the necessity of a crisis point in the life of an individual ("coming to faith") denies the experience of many people that Christian faith is something which gradually develops - sometimes over a lifetime.

In the body of the work Ireland notes the high percentage of people (30%) recorded as coming to faith on the Credo course. He suggests one reason for this may be that "30 of the 59 recorded as coming to faith on Credo come from a single parish, and the particular incumbent's enthusiasm for Credo may have influenced his interpretation of the question asked" (Ireland, 2000, p.56). But Ireland does not apparently recognise that this may also be true of Alpha courses. Presumably those clergy who have invested time, energy, money and emotional capital in Alpha, will also be eager to find converts.

From Ireland's Abstract again: "I conclude that a ten-week course can only begin the process of initiation."

The use of the word "initiation" here is of interest. No explanation is given as to what it means. Historically, initiation into the church has been by baptism and, in the Church of England at least, admission to full communicant status has generally been achieved through Confirmation; but the implication here is that something else is required. If so, there is a significant doctrinal issue for the church to be addressed.

In my interview with a bishop (see Chapter Six), he spoke of what "mission" was about:

One of the confusions I found with groups doing Alpha is not understanding the distinction between mission and evangelism, and they will use the words as if they are interchangeable. Then I say to them that for me mission is about carrying on the work of Jesus on earth, and that involves evangelism but it also involves worship and it involves peace and justice issues, protest and healing and preaching and so on, and also involves evangelism. Evangelism is the process by which people come to faith, and that's only part of the church's mission.

(Bishop Interview, 2001).

Ireland is Diocesan Missioner for Lichfield Diocese and clearly sees his 'mission' brief as being not so much about the whole work of the church in the world, as primarily about recruitment:

This [research into decline in church attendance] would help me in my work as missioner to better resource the parishes of the diocese and the Bishop's Staff in the work of evangelism and outreach....
There were a number of key areas I wished to research in order to discover strategies which might help churches seeking to reverse the gentle decline in church attendance. (Ireland, 2000, p.8).

This recruitment for the churches is described as part of the diocesan strategy of "Growing the Kingdom" (Ireland, 2000, p.7) - rather different from the gospel imperative of "Seeking the Kingdom" (Luke, chapter 12, verse 31). This may appear to be nit-picking, but there is an important issue here about how the church sees its task. There is a school of thought, particularly at a time of diminishing numbers and diminishing income, which sees the church's task primarily in terms of filling pews, to which Ireland seems to subscribe. Others take a different view. (The present research suggests that clergy have a variety of views on this - see Chapter Eight). In her book, The C of E, The State It's In, (Hodder & Stoughton, 2000), Monica Furlong, for example, wants to reclaim the notion of service as being the primary mission of the church, rather than recruitment. She quotes an interview with a priest whom she refers to as Fr Jones:

The church is there to serve people - there is far too little about servant theology in Turnbull [a recent C of E report] - not get them into church buildings for its own ends. If they come, that is wonderful, that is gift, not a matter for triumph. In my own working-class parish we found that if we carefully worked out what the needs of the people were, we could (just) find the resources to serve them. This did in fact bring people to church, but the emphasis was service, on what we could do for them. I hear very little of that in the present dialogue. In any case the "bums-on-seats" method doesn't work. People sense the falsity of it. They're not stupid. (Furlong, 2000, p.198).

In the context of the present research, part of the service which a church might render to people is the chance to explore the meaning of life, as Alpha claims, but without a hidden evangelistic agenda. Perhaps a church which has the courage to do this might be considered a 'strong' church. But for Ireland, numbers are the key criterion for deciding which are strong churches and which are struggling, and are even an indicator of the personal and spiritual development of the clergy: “Helping clergy in their personal and spiritual development is a key factor in the growth of their churches” (Ireland, 2000, p.8). ‘Growth’ here is meant in purely numerical terms, rather than in any personal, religious or spiritual sense. Indeed, even for churches which already have large congregations, Ireland sees his task purely in terms of making them even bigger: “I would like to explore whether there are ways of breaking through the glass ceiling which appears to stop our large churches from growing further” (Ireland, 2000, p.8). One is tempted to respond that there are many ways to gather together large groups of people, from giving away prizes, to providing free entertainment. Others may consider that mission has something to do
with service, faith, and addressing people's deepest needs and profoundest questions, not simply cramming as many people as possible into a building.

Ireland's questionnaire to the clergy asked how many times the course (Alpha or one of the other process evangelism courses) had been run, how many people had attended, and how many people had come to Christian faith, commitment or Confirmation. Again, these three questions are all about numbers, which are then used as measures of effectiveness of the course offered. These are straightforward questions to answer, and reflect a particular understanding of the mission of the church. Once more, no acknowledgement is made of other understandings of what the mission of the church might be, which would entail other, less easily measurable success-criteria, such as: 'Is the local community a more caring place as a result of the conversion of these individuals? What difference has their conversion made to their lifestyle? How do they treat their neighbour? Are they better able to cope with life's crises?' For the proponents of the Alpha course, with its copyright protection, evangelism appears to involve the creation of a community of people who all think and believe the same doctrines. Others may see evangelism as having more to do with seeking, discovering and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and living as citizens of it. And according to the Gospels in the New Testament, the Kingdom of God may be found in all kinds of unlikely places, inside and outside the church. There, the figure of Jesus gave lots of clues in his parables as to how to recognise it, and it had little to do with right belief. It had far more to do with right attitude (see, for example, the Parables of the Kingdom in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13).

Ireland concedes a weakness in his data-gathering method:

Another reason for the wide variation in percentages coming to faith on Alpha from deanery to deanery might be that the answers to question 3 "Each time you have run the course approximately how many people have come to Christian faith, commitment or confirmation?" depend on the subjective judgement of the respondent - in most cases the priest - as to how many people came to Christian faith or commitment during the course. (Ireland, 2000, p.25).

The variation may also reflect clergy's differing views about what 'coming to faith' might mean. Some will be more disparaging than others of people's previous Christian commitment.

On the claimed introductory nature of Alpha, Ireland writes:

Millar stressed that Alpha "is an introductory course" and that each church is free to add their own follow-up teaching after Alpha, in line with their own position. At Holy Trinity Brompton Alpha is just the first term of a two-year Christian initiation programme. "People are very grateful to Alpha for a course that does not try to
make people Anglicans, but helps them first decide whether there is a God or not". (Ireland, 2000, p.31).

But deciding whether or not there is a God does not feature in the course. It is evident that belief in God is assumed. From my research (see Chapter Eight) and that of Hunt (see above) into the discussions in the groups, it is also evident that such an assumption is on the whole correct (i.e. that there is such a belief held).

Ireland put to Gumbel and Millar the concern that too much space in the course was devoted to ‘speaking in tongues’. They replied that they wanted to give tongues a significant amount of teaching time:

Millar commented, "When we pray for people to be filled with the Spirit some people spontaneously speak in tongues, and therefore we need to teach about it". (Ireland, 2001, p.34).

When questioned about the limitations imposed by the Alpha copyright, Gumbel surprisingly used the analogy of McDonald's - an analogy used by Pete Ward to critique Alpha (see Ward, 1998).

Gumbel: "If I went to McDonald's in Moscow and was given a ham sandwich, I would say that's not on."

Millar explained that, like McDonald's, Alpha aims for consistency so that people can recommend the course to friends in other places with confidence. (Ireland, 2000, p.40).

Ireland suggests that the principle ‘belonging comes before believing’, lies behind the Alpha course (Ireland, 2000, p.49). This is questionable. People might come to a meal and be made welcome, but that is different from belonging to a worshipping community. Alpha takes the individual straight into ‘believing’ by the end of the Holy Spirit Weekend. Belonging to the church comes afterwards. The problems of such haste are illustrated by one of the interviews I conducted: “After that [the Holy Spirit Weekend] it was assumed you were a Christian. I wasn't, and had more questions” (Interview with Alpha graduate - see Chapter Eight).

Martyn Percy makes the same point:

The assumption Alpha appears to make - common to a good deal of evangelical apologetics - is that people become Christians first, then think about joining a church. This disassociation is highly problematic. Whilst individual evangelists and various agencies
target the millions beyond church structures, the majority of conversions often fail to be properly inculcated in to the church. (Percy, 1997, pp. 14&15).

The evidence of my interviews with those who had been on an *Alpha* course (see Chapter Eight) suggests that the overwhelmingly majority were in fact already churchgoers, so that this problem only arose for a small minority. If these newcomers do make it along to church there may be another problem, as Pete Ward points out:

*Alpha* offers those from outside of the church an experience of the faith which has a measure of unreality. Membership of a local church, regular Sunday worship and so on are simply not like *Alpha*.

It is difficult, for example, to experience the transcendence of God in one’s living room, or be prepared for the demanding task of worshipping alongside people, some of whom one might not otherwise wish to associate with. But this latter is the reality of Christian living.

Ireland also recognises the difficulty:

Churches in our diocese have also encountered the situation where those who are happy to belong in the comfortable and intimate surroundings of a home, with a highly polished and gifted speaker on video, then attend the Sunday service and find it so radically different that they do not make the transition from *Alpha* to church. The experience of belonging to a course and belonging to church on Sunday need to share a common feel. Running a process evangelism course will not help a church to grow unless the Sunday worship is of a kind that will nurture and develop the faith of new believers.
(Ireland, 2000, p. 49).

It is significant that Ireland sees the solution to this problem as being the church changing what it offers to conform to *Alpha*, rather than finding a course which relates to the realities of church life. Hence *Alpha* ceases to be an evangelistic tool, and becomes a controlling influence; and *Alpha* itself is controlled by HTB. One senior church leader whom I interviewed felt that those running his *Alpha* course in his large Evangelical church seemed more accountable to HTB than to him:

It was a big church - we had thirty housegroups by this time - a lot of things lay led - you had to trust people, but you also had to keep them accountable. I felt that the leader of the whole thing was accountable to Sandy Millar by this stage and not to me.
(Archdeacon Interview, 2001).
This whole issue of accountability is significant. If Alpha cannot be altered to fit in with the particular emphases, style and teaching of the local church, but rather the local church must alter what it offers to fit in with Alpha, then who is using whom? Ireland sees "the local church as the primary agent in evangelism" (Ireland, 2000, p.52), but if the local church has to conform to Alpha (if it is to be used at all), then Alpha is no longer a tool for evangelism which a local church might use, but rather Alpha (and HTB which controls it) is using the local church to propagate its own particular brand of Christianity. I put this point to Nicky Gumbel:

SB: If it can't be adapted by the local church, is it not Alpha using the local church rather than the local church being able to use Alpha? Every church is different. When they've been through Alpha, what they find in their local church may be rather different from what they've been led to expect.

NG: The copyright says it can be adapted for local situations if the talks need to be done in a way that is relevant to the local people. That's the whole point, so that they don't..... And it's not a question of owing allegiance to anyone except Christ. Alpha is a tool which, if people like it, if they agree with the theology of it, then they can run it, adapt it to their local need, use their own illustrations, own applications. The whole point is there isn't allegiance to anyone except to Christ and to the community and to the friends that they make. (Gumbel Interview, 2001).

The alterations which Gumbel permits relate only to presentational details, so that local culture can be taken into account, but the substance of the course, for example the emphasis on speaking in tongues, must not be diluted. In effect the local church must accept the whole package and conform to it or not use it at all, even though Gumbel emphasises that it is a tool which everyone can use. It can indeed be used by any church, but there may be a theological price to pay if one is to abide by the copyright. The anecdotal evidence is that many churches simply ignore the copyright and change the course as they see fit.

Ireland perceives Alpha to be about asking questions and engagement with other Christians:

Evangelism today is typically carried out in groups, over a series of meetings, in which enquirers can ask questions and engage with Christians at a personal level. Such an approach fits better with a culture in which the background information of the faith can no longer be assumed, in which people make up their own minds rather than look to some external authority to tell them what to
think or do, and in which the process of experience-reflection-action forms the basis of learning. (Ireland, 2000, p.50).

However, the people in the group can engage with each other, but they cannot engage with the speaker (probably on video). It is one-way communication. He is in effect an “external authority telling them what to think”. The teaching given is non-negotiable. The discussion in the group will not influence the speaker.

Ireland critiques Martyn Percy's paper, "Join-the-dots Christianity" (Percy, 1997), accepting some of his points but dismissing others. Ireland quotes Percy's point that "there is little space for people to reflect on and vent their own concerns", and points out that in fact the small group discussions allow people to ask anything (Ireland, 2000, p. 71). The latter point is true in that people are allowed to express their views, and their views will be listened to, but they will not be taken on board if they do not accord with the doctrinal line taken on the course. Nothing will affect the direction which the course takes. People may find it therapeutic to get things off their chests, but the truths contained in the course, particularly in the talks, cannot be challenged. The course is in no sense open-ended or open to new insights. In this sense it is not exploratory so much as catechetical.

He [Percy] also asserts that Alpha mostly "excites and galvanises existing believers" whereas my research gives clear evidence of 992 people in Lichfield Diocese who have come to Christian faith, commitment or confirmation through the course. Brierley's research, cited previously, also shows that churches that have been running Alpha for three or more years are significantly more likely to see numerical growth in attendance. (Ireland, 2000, p.71).

Ireland has not interviewed any of these 992 people, but rather relies on the impressions of those clergy who have put on the course (and who therefore may have an interest in proclaiming it a success). My interviews, and those of Hunt, show that at least some of those who profess to have become Christians on Alpha courses are in fact already churchgoers. Hunt and I both conclude that a principal effect of Alpha has been to extend the influence of Charismatic Christianity in the wider church. In that sense, Percy is right. Alpha primarily ‘recycles’ existing believers, converting them not from non-believers into believers, but from one sort of Christian into another. As explained above, Brierley's statistics do not demonstrate that people attending Alpha churches are actually new, rather than existing Christians, neither do they demonstrate a causal link between Alpha and church growth. As explained, it may well be that churches which have the commitment, resources and energy to run Alpha many times over are probably the kind of churches which are likely to grow numerically anyway, with or without Alpha.
Ireland discusses the importance given by Alpha to ‘testimony’:

The Director of Communications (at HTB) told me that one of his key priorities is to find good personal testimonies of how God has met with people who would not have previously described themselves as Christians through the Alpha course. Every edition of Alpha News contains a number of these stories, and he has edited two books of Alpha testimonies. Mainstream denominations have tended to be uncomfortable with personal testimony, except in churches with an evangelical or charismatic tradition. Yet in contemporary popular culture people absorb information through stories and personalities, as the popular newspapers demonstrate. The post-modern mindset does not begin by asking of a religion or philosophy "Is it true?", but "Does it work?" When people see how God has changed a person's life, then they are more inclined to take seriously the possibility of a God who is real. In the Diocese of Lichfield we have just begun to include a regular testimony slot in our diocesan newspaper, Spotlight, but we are not aware of any other diocesan newspaper that does so.

(Ireland, 2000, p.77).

Ireland seems to have accepted these published testimonies entirely uncritically. All of them follow the same required pattern, beginning with a dismissal of early religious experience as "boring" or "I was made to go" or "My parents went to church but weren't real Christians" etc., i.e. they are informed by a particular (Charismatic Evangelical) theology and notion of what it is to be a real Christian. Also, like any newspaper story, these accounts are carefully selected, subject to editorial control, and a particular pattern is called for and encouraged. I wrote to Mark Elsdon-Dew, the Communications Director of Alpha, about this, and part of his written reply was as follows:

There is no particular set of questions, but I do try to give a précis of the individual's life story - with particular reference to their attitude to faith. I usually choose stories which I consider to be the most interesting to the reader.

(Elsdon-Dew, March 2001).

(Some of these testimonies, which appear in Alpha News, are analysed in Chapter Four)

Ireland also seems to accept the validity of "Does it work?" rather than "Is it true?". This criterion seems to leave him open to the acceptance of anything that appears to "work". One wonders, however, if it is not "true", for how long it will "work". When events occur that do not fit the particular world-view on offer, will the scheme of belief offered prove sufficient?
Ireland concludes that:

Every church needs a nurturing group where enquirers are able to belong before they are asked to believe, to ask whatever for them are the big questions about life, and to explore the Christian faith. (Ireland, 2000, p.78).

Non-Alpha churches may see this “nurturing group” as being the church itself, which should encourage people to belong before they necessarily believe, to ask questions, and to explore the breadth and depth of the Christian faith in whatever ways they find most helpful.

In Millar and Gumbel's response to Ireland's paper (a letter dated 12th December 2000) they write the following:

At the moment they can have complete confidence that it is essentially the same course wherever they do it, whatever the denomination or tradition of that church.

This means that it is no longer part of the local church, which may, in its normal worshipping life, have quite different emphases from its neighbour. Thus Alpha is serviced by, but not based in the local church, as claimed, but rather has a free-standing separate existence, independent of all churches except HTB. HTB is surely fully entitled to create and control such a course, but ought not to make the universal claim that it is an introduction to Christianity. Rather, it is an introduction to HTB's version of Christianity, which is shared by many but not all churches, as evidenced both by churches which do not wish to use it at all and those who wish to adapt it. Alpha could be seen as failing to acknowledge that Christianity is always experienced through a local church with all that church's particular quirks and idiosyncrasies. Can Alpha, or any course, offer a pure and universal form of Christian basics devoid of any bias? Is such a course possible? To suggest that having done Alpha, a church is then free to add on its own particular teaching may be to underestimate the real differences that exist. Such a sequel may mean ‘un-teaching’ what had been previously taught.

Ireland's critique takes a great deal on trust, and has not attempted to examine the function of Alpha beyond secondary reports. My own research attempts to address this.
PART THREE - THE PEOPLE

Part Three focusses on the fieldwork of the research. It explains and justifies the research methods used and explains and analyses the data derived from the questionnaires and interviews.

Chapter Seven - Research Methods

As a growing phenomenon, Alpha is worthy of research from any of a variety of perspectives. Stephen Hunt (2001) has examined it from a sociological perspective, and Martyn Percy (1997 and 1998) has written briefly about its theology and ecclesiology. The present research takes an educational perspective because of Alpha's essentially educational claim, aimed at those outside the church, to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life; hence, the primary research question is: Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?

But this analysis cannot be isolated from these other disciplines, particularly as Alpha's selling point within the church is the claim that it will create new Christians; hence the secondary research question is: What is the function of Alpha's teaching?

'Teaching' here embraces both the content and the methods used.

The research methods employed utilize published material (and some unpublished - see Ireland (2000) and Jarvis (2002)), questionnaires (see Appendix 1) and interviews (see Appendices 2 and 3), all to address the same fundamental question of whether Alpha does indeed, as it claims, offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, a claim which, in its open-endedness implies an educational purpose for the course. The published testimonies of Alpha graduates are examined in Chapter Four and the basic Alpha texts (and an Alpha Conference) are examined in Chapter Five. Relevant literature from other sources has also been utilized in the course of all the previous chapters to illuminate the methods and functions of Alpha. The present chapter describes and justifies the use made of questionnaires and interviews and identifies the issues raised by these methods.

The role of the questionnaire (see 'Stage One' below and Appendix 1) is important in that it gave people the opportunity to identify the sorts of issues that a phrase like 'The Meaning of Life' would raise for them. It was necessary, however, that the main question ('If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like discussed under that heading, what would they be?') should be left open-ended (rather than offering a number of alternatives) so as to give people the opportunity to express themselves freely. As pointed out in the Introduction, people's understanding of such a concept is not easily measurable. Providing a limited number of alternatives from which to choose might have entailed unacceptable foreclosure of unforeseen responses. This illustrates the difficulty which would have been experienced in using quantitative research methods in exploring something as profound and elusive as the
meaning of life. Hence, quantitative research methods were rejected in favour of in-depth interviews (following the questionnaire stage).

Nevertheless, this research is based on the belief that it is possible to find some degree of consensus as to what people might expect from a course making such a claim, and the extent to which Alpha meets that claim, initially through questionnaires, and more extensively through interviews, which together make up a collection of case studies. These case studies were initially derived from an adult education centre, this being an environment where the sort of people who might undertake an Alpha course could be found, i.e., people with the time, ability and inclination to take on a ‘course’. Subsequent case studies were drawn from two Anglican deaneries (groups of parishes in geographical proximity - see ‘Stage Four’, below) and are of clergy who have led Alpha courses or who have informed observations to make, people who have taken an Alpha Course, senior clergy (an archdeacon and a bishop), an academic who has written on the subject, and the founder of Alpha. It is in the nature of such qualitative research that it cannot lead to one clearly-defined conclusion of the type appropriate to quantitative research, but, as made clear in the Introduction, it can give an indication as to whether it is meeting its claim at least in the locality in which the research took place and, if not, what its actual function is, and what wider implications can be drawn. The diversity of research methods (analysis of literature, and case studies) utilized to test Alpha’s claims were selected to give greater validity to any common findings with regard to the meeting of Alpha’s claim and its wider function.

In my role as researcher I presented myself to all the non-clerical interviewees as simply a research student, and this was supported by my student card. I did not mention my role as a cleric because of the possibility that this might influence the responses that people gave, though this led to an ethical dilemma in itself (see below). All were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with the exception of the academic (Pete Ward) and the founder (Nicky Gumbel), both of whom were happy to permit use of their interviews in the present thesis. Pete Ward’s interview is related back to his written critique (see Chapter Six) and frequent reference is made throughout the thesis to Nicky Gumbel as the founder of Alpha, so anonymity was not a realistic possibility for either.

Ethical issues arose in the course of the interviews. In some cases, this was clearly because of the personal and emotionally powerful nature of the material being discussed and because of the one-to-one interview resembling a ‘counselling’ situation. For two interviewees in particular, the issue of suffering, raised by them on their questionnaires and again in the course of their interviews, was a live issue because of their personal situation and experience. They may have found the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences with a stranger who was prepared to listen, therapeutic, but my own position then became rather problematic. I was present as a researcher, not as a counsellor (nor indeed as a priest). This gave rise to the following questions. Even if the interview was in some way therapeutic for the interviewee, could my own role be construed as exploitative? Was I there for my benefit or for the interviewee’s? Did it in practice make any difference? Was the
necessity of detachment to make the research credible ethically justifiable? Was I there just to take something from someone who was already in a vulnerable position? All these issues led to a certain amount of unease on my part. Another, perhaps lesser issue was that during the course of the interviews, despite the distance from my own place of work, occasionally the name of a clergyman whom I knew was mentioned and comments were made about them. While the issue of confidentiality on my part is not one I have difficulty with, nevertheless I was aware that, had the interviewee known I was myself a clergyman and therefore might have known the person mentioned, they might have been more reluctant to use the name. This served to raise the ethical question of whether it is justifiable to withhold information about oneself (i.e., my role as a clergyman) which might influence what people say, given the deception this involves. Yet to have revealed my role, as mentioned above, could have changed the whole course of the interview, if it meant that people took my role into account before they gave a response. There is clearly an ethical price to be paid for this kind of research because of its close relationship with my professional practice.

Another issue also raised by the proximity of this research to my professional practice is that of theological stance. The Introduction makes clear that my own theological perspective is more liberal than the essentially Charismatic Evangelical nature of the Alpha course. Nevertheless, every attempt has been made to allow the comments and criticisms voiced by each of the participants in the research to be heard and interpreted as fairly as possible. Similarly, every criticism made of Alpha which involves a theological perspective has been fully explained, and any observations of Alpha’s success or failure in meeting its own claims have been made by reference to those same claims without any external reference to a different (more liberal) agenda.

This part of the research was conducted over eight stages: firstly the questionnaire stage, then interview stages with people from an adult education centre who had not been on an Alpha course, with people from the adult education centre who had been on an Alpha course, with clergy, Alpha graduates, senior clergy, an academic and the founder.

Stage One - Questionnaires

(See Appendix 1)

The course claims to appeal primarily to the unchurched. Indeed, its use of posters in public places and its avoidance of religious jargon confirm this aspiration. It was to the unchurched, then, that the first stage of the research was directed and carried out in January and February 2000.

This questionnaire was first piloted amongst other PhD students in the Department of Educational Studies at Surrey University, several schoolteachers, some comprehensive school sixth-formers, a psychotherapist, and another individual of unknown occupation; twenty respondents in all. As a result of this the questionnaire was slightly amended (see below).
Then, to locate a cross-section of the kind of people for whom *Alpha* might be intended, I negotiated access to adults undertaking various evening courses at an adult education centre. The director of the centre herself had, by chance, been through an *Alpha* course and was generally sympathetic to the research. Through her I contacted eight tutors, seven of whom were willing to allow me to administer questionnaires (see Appendix 1) to their students at the end of their classes. Students who were willing to cooperate then spent approximately ten minutes completing them.

Students attending different types of courses (vocational, academic, and ‘hobby’*) were selected. These were: Basic Computing, History, French, Tap Dancing, Badminton and Art. Eighty-three questionnaires were distributed and completed in full or in part.

The first two (preliminary) questions on the questionnaire were ‘closed-ended’ and easy to answer. The first was:

*Have you attended church more than twice during the previous year, not counting baptisms, weddings, funerals and school services?*

The purpose of this question was to classify respondents into churchgoers and non-churchgoers by means of a necessarily arbitrary minimum level of attendance. This is relevant because *Alpha* claims to be targeting non-Christians (although it is also true that *Alpha* does distinguish between Christians and mere churchgoers). According to the criteria given, thirty-six respondents were classified as churchgoers and forty-seven respondents were classified as non-churchgoers. The latter group in particular would be a primary target for *Alpha*.

The second question was designed to detect respondents who may have completed an *Alpha* course and whose responses to the subsequent question may then be distorted through recognition. This question was:

*Have you attended any course looking at religious belief in the last six years? If so, what was the title of the course or its main focus of study?*

Seven had attended *Alpha* courses.

*Alpha* claims to offer people an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. The main, open-ended question on the questionnaire was designed to test this claim:

*If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like discussed under that heading, what would they be?*

Half a page of the A4 questionnaire was available for the responses.
One respondent in the pilot group (a PhD student) found the exercise so daunting that she was totally unable to write anything at all. Others found they did not have enough space on the paper. This pilot questionnaire asked respondents to submit seven questions, but for most this proved too many, so the number was subsequently reduced to five.

Towards the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to tick age-range and gender boxes. However, this information was not used in the analysis as it became apparent that it would have taken the present research into new realms and made the project much bigger. Also, my main concern was not so much with the age and gender profile of the participants as with their religious background and the subject matter. However, the relevance of age and gender in the functioning of Alpha could well form the basis of another research project (see Chapter Ten).

The final question was then:

_I hope to discuss these questions and answers further with some respondents. If you are willing to be interviewed at some mutually convenient place and time, please write your name and contact telephone number below._

_Many thanks for your time._

_Name:_ **Contact Number:**

Of the eighty three who attempted the questionnaire, twenty-seven respondents gave their name and eighteen gave their telephone numbers and were subsequently contacted. Of these, fourteen actually agreed to be interviewed, the interviews taking place in the respondents’ homes or at the adult education centre during March and April 2000. They were recorded on audio tape. Two of these respondents (at their request) were interviewed at the same time, though questioned separately. Each interview lasted for between half an hour and an hour.

**Stage Two - Interviews with people from the adult education centre who had not attended an Alpha course**

(See Appendices 2 and 3)

Ten of the interviewees from the adult education centre had not been on an Alpha course. They were each asked whether or not they were churchgoers, whether or not they considered themselves to be Christians and what sort of background and upbringing they had with regard to the church. They were then asked to expand on the answers they had given on the questionnaire concerning the sorts of issues they would expect to be addressed on any course which claimed to be offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. These questions take cognizance of Alpha’s claim to be targeting non-Christians in its course. In accordance with its claim, Alpha addresses particular questions in its series of talks which it believes are the questions which non-Christians are asking. The present research seeks to examine that belief to see if they are indeed the appropriate questions.
The interviewees were then asked if they would expect such a course to include some examination of the views of a number of different religions concerning the meaning of life. They were also asked how they would react if the course turned out to be primarily a presentation of Christianity. These questions were designed to test the legitimacy of the claim of Alpha to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, at least in the views of ten individuals who had not been on an Alpha course.

Stage Three - Interviews with people from the adult education centre who had attended an Alpha course

(See Appendix 2).

There were four people in this category. They were asked about their churchgoing habits, if any, whether or not they would regard themselves as Christians, and their background and upbringing with regard to the church. Again, these questions take cognizance of Alpha’s claim regarding targeting non-Christians. They were then asked how they had come to go on the course. This was also designed to discover whether they were new to the church. They were then asked about their experience of the course, their views on what they saw and experienced, the extent to which it dealt with the issues they had listed on their questionnaire, whether they felt it offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, whether they felt drawn to the church as a result of it, their views on the Holy Spirit Day, and any other comments or observations they wished to make.

One other individual was also interviewed who was located not through the adult education centre but by accident of circumstance. He was what might be classified as an Alpha drop-out, having started but not finished the course. Such people are not easy to locate, so I took the opportunity to interview him, though there is no attempt to treat him as in any way a counter-balance to the many who completed the course. He is simply a particular small-scale case study who has interesting and relevant observations to make.

Stage Four - The Clergy

(See Appendices 2 and 3).

The most substantial part of the fieldwork for this research took place in two Church of England deaneries located in a large southern diocese. A deanery (sometimes referred to as a ‘rural deanery’ or an ‘area deanery’) comprises a collection of parishes in a particular location. A rural (or ‘area’) dean has certain administrative responsibilities in his or her deanery and a pastoral responsibility for the clergy. He or she usually has charge of one of the parishes in the deanery. Though geographically quite close (about four miles apart) one of the selected deaneries was in a generally well-to-do semi-rural location, much of which is classified by ACORN - ‘A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods’ - as ‘Affluent Suburbs’, and the other in a generally less well-to-do urban location, classified by ACORN largely as ‘Flats
and Bedsits'. (For details of the ACORN classification system, visit www.caci.co.uk). However, not all the parishes in each deanery are uniform. The two deaneries were selected because of their proximity and diverse social mix, though it was not the intention of this research to focus particularly on possible links between the social make-up of a parish and the function of Alpha. However, such a possible link occasionally arose in the course of the interviews and may be a fruitful area for further research (see Chapter Ten). These deaneries were also selected because they were near enough to enable me to make a series of visits, but in a different diocese from my own to lessen the chance of any kind of recognition or professional link with myself. The research was limited to specifically Anglican clergy for three reasons. Firstly, this is my own denomination and this research is closely related to my own professional practice. Secondly, Holy Trinity Brompton, the headquarters of Alpha, is itself an Anglican Church, and therefore Alpha was, initially at least, an Anglican phenomenon. Thirdly, because the Anglican Church is the most widespread Church in this country, a given geographical area yields a higher density of clergy. In the text that follows, the first of these two deaneries is referred to as deanery ‘A’, and the second as deanery ‘B’.

The rural dean of A supplied the names of five clergy in his deanery, three of whom had run Alpha courses and two of whom had not but were familiar with them. Each was interviewed for between half an hour and an hour, and again the interviews were recorded on audio-tape. These interviews were carried out in May 2000. The interviews were again semi-structured, giving the interviewees the opportunity to express what they wanted to say, whilst maintaining consistency in the questions asked. Most of the questions were open-ended (see Appendix 2) and were designed to elicit the views of these clergy regarding Alpha’s educational and evangelistic claims. A similar process was carried out in deanery ‘B’. This time, nine clergy - all those suggested by the rural dean - were contacted (see Appendix 4) and interviewed. Deanery B is significantly bigger than deanery A. After each interview, each member of the clergy was asked to supply the details of some people they knew who had completed the Alpha course and who might be willing to be interviewed. They were also asked that these should be people of as wide a spread of ages and views as possible.

Stage Five - The Alpha Graduates

(See Appendices 2 and 3)

The clergy identified twenty-two people from deanery A and nineteen people from deanery B, and these were interviewed during the summer of 2000. All of them had attended an Alpha course in whole or in part. (No churchgoers who had not enrolled on Alpha were selected for interview because these would not have been Alpha’s claimed target group and would not have experienced Alpha first-hand). Some were interviewed singly and some in couples. All the interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour. All the interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ homes, except one which took place in a church building. Again the interviews were semi-structured. The same questions were asked of all interviewees, but they were
sufficiently open-ended to allow each respondent to recount their own individual experience and give their evaluation of it. The questions began by asking them about their own prior experience of the church and then took them through the stages of the course (admission to the course, first impressions, the talks, the group discussions and the Holy Spirit Weekend). They were then asked specifically about how the Alpha course dealt with the questions which people had raised on the questionnaires, how it measured up to its claim to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and then more general evaluative questions to give people the opportunity to express their views of the course without constraint. The questions asked, and the reasons for each were as follows:

1. **Tell me a little about your own background as far as the church is concerned, e.g. Brownies / Cubs / Sunday School / School / Youth Club / Parents etc. Were you a churchgoer before you did the Alpha course?**

   This was to determine the interviewee’s degree of existing commitment to the church, given that Alpha is intended for non-Christians. It may be that claimed new converts were actually rooted into the church from an early age, even though they are not recent churchgoers, and are thus able to recognise the religious ideas and language which the Alpha course uses.

2. **How did you come to go on the Alpha course in the first place?**

   Again, where and how the interviewee heard about Alpha would give an indication as to whether or not he or she was already ‘inside’ the church. Posters in public places and leaflet-drops through letterboxes advertising Alpha courses are aimed at people outside the Church, whereas advertisements in parish magazines and on internal church notice-boards and the like will be aimed at churchgoers.

3. **What was your first impression when you turned up? Were there others there like you? What did you make of the people you met? What sort of proportions were churchgoers and non-churchgoers?**

   This was intended to give an impression of whether the course was in fact made up of existing churchgoers or of people new to the church and how the person felt about that, i.e. whether they saw themselves as one of the majority or perhaps one of a small minority, the perception being regarded as at least as important as the actual numerical fact.

4. **What did you make of the talks? Did you find the speaker / video persuasive?**

   This question was intended to help discover the effectiveness of the talks in generating new thoughts or prompting the listeners to re-evaluate their existing beliefs. Did they find it a learning experience? What effect did the talks have on their thinking? What did they perceive the agenda of the speaker to be?
5. How did you find the group discussions? What sort of questions came up?

Alpha believes the group discussion is the place where people can raise any question they wish, though leaders are advised not to try to give answers. This question was designed to discover what questions arose and whether they were dealt with in a way the questioner found satisfying. Was there the kind of informed, open-ended discussion one might expect from a course offering an ‘exploration’?

6. Have you been on the Holy Spirit Day / Weekend? What did you think of it?

This is probably the most controversial aspect of the course. The question was designed to discover whether the teaching which Alpha recommends is actually given, and, if it is, how people respond in particular to the ‘Ministry Time’ (see Chapter Five). Was this also essentially a learning experience? Were people being treated with respect? What was the agenda?

7. Did you go into the course with questions you wanted answered? If so, were they answered?

This was to discover whether or not the Alpha course is as exploratory as it claims, and whether it actually addresses people’s concerns.

8. Were any of the following issues raised? (summarised):
   * Life after death - Why are we here?
   * The problem of suffering
   * Religion and science
   * Existence of God

These were the issues most frequently occurring on the completed questionnaires. The question is therefore designed to detect whether the issues people would expect to be dealt with on a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life were actually addressed.

9. The Alpha course claims to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you think it succeeds in doing that?

This is a question which directly addresses the key focus of the present research.

10. What sort of people do you think Alpha works best with? Who do you think it is unlikely to work with?

This question was designed to discover whether, in the view of the Alpha graduate, the course is actually functioning effectively with people without a Christian background, or whether some Christian background is required to make sense of it, or whether it actually attracts primarily those who are already committed Christians and churchgoers.
11. **What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha?**

12. **Overall impression of Alpha?**

These are more general questions designed to glean an assessment of *Alpha* from individuals who found the course sufficiently engaging to stay (in most cases) to the end.

**Stage Six - The Senior Clergy**

(See Appendix 2).

Holy Trinity Brompton frequently claims the support of senior church leaders for *Alpha*. This is most obvious in the advertisements for *Alpha* in the church press and in the forewords to *Alpha* publications. *Telling Others* (Gumbel 1994a, 1997 edition) for example, quotes no less than sixty-one commendations from church leaders.

Therefore, two senior clergy - an archdeacon and a suffragan bishop - of the diocese within which the two deaneries fall were interviewed on separate occasions in January and February 2001. Each interview lasted for an hour and was recorded on audio-tape. Again the interviews were semi-structured, i.e. the questions asked were predetermined and were the same for each, but most were sufficiently open-ended to allow the interviewees room to express their views in detail and at length if they so wished. The questions asked were similar to those asked of the other clergy, except that because the position of these two meant that they were not directly involved in the life of a particular parish but were likely to be invited by parishes to endorse or be involved in leading a course, they were asked initially:

*What experience do you have of Alpha, direct or indirect? Have you been asked to give any of the talks or be involved in some way? Have you been asked to endorse it or encourage it or promote it? Have you seen direct evidence of its fruits? Have people expressed their views to you about it - good or bad?*

**Stage Seven - The Academic**

(See Appendices 2 and 3).

There has as yet been little scholarly work written about *Alpha*. One academic who has made a contribution was interviewed for an hour. Pete Ward, the author of *Alpha - The McDonaldization of Religion?*, Anvil, Vol 15, No 4, pp.279-286, 1998, was asked about his experience of *Alpha*, what he thought about the claim of *Alpha* to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, about its claims of orthodoxy, its purpose and function, its effectiveness, and whether or not it really did address the questions ordinary people might ask. He was also asked about the reasons for *Alpha*'s numerical success and what he thought of the Holy Spirit Weekend. He was then asked questions relating specifically to the article he had written about *Alpha* and the responses it precipitated both from HTB and others. He was then asked about the
educational and evangelistic worth of *Alpha*, and more general questions about the educational and evangelistic tasks of the church: what they are and how compatible they are. Finally, he was asked about the importance of numerical growth in the church, and how one measures the ‘success’ of a church.

**Stage Eight - The Founder**

(See Appendix 2).

While Nicky Gumbel would claim to have taken over an existing course, there is no doubt that he is the principal creator of the course in its modern form and is responsible for the authorship of the key books, audio-tapes and videotapes. He is the Assistant Curate of Holy Trinity Brompton.

Gumbel was interviewed on the fourteenth of March 2001 at Holy Trinity Brompton. Again, a semi-structured method was used, the interview was taped and lasted just over an hour. Mark Elsdon-Dew, a leading staff-member at Holy Trinity Brompton, was present for most of the interview but did not contribute until the end. Gumbel was relaxed, unhurried, open and courteous in his manner and placed no restrictions on our discussion or on my subsequent use of the taped material.

I asked him initially about his religious background, how the *Alpha* course came to be in its present form, whether or not he planned to integrate any of the questions which arose in the group discussions (described in *Searching Issues* (Gumbel, 1994b)) into the talks, the difficulties of engaging in discussion with someone speaking on a videotape, the function of the small groups and where he saw *Alpha* in relation to revival movements of the past. I then asked him how he saw *Alpha*’s contribution to the mission of the church, the main strengths and weaknesses of *Alpha*, whether he saw it as a timely response to postmodernism, whether he thought *Alpha*’s task was educational as well as evangelistic, or whether it was, as Martyn Percy suggests, more catechetical.

I then moved on to criticisms of *Alpha* by Pete Ward, Martyn Percy and Stephen Hunt (see Chapter Six), asking how he responded to them. Mark Ireland’s dissertation was not used here, as he appears to share too many of Gumbel’s presuppositions (see Chapter Six). I then asked about the apparent Charismatic ‘bias’ of *Alpha* in a course intended for use by mainstream Christian denominations, particularly with regard to its teaching about the Holy Spirit and glossolalia. I supplemented these with a question about *Alpha*’s relationship to the Toronto Blessing (see Chapter Two). I also put to him the reservations of those who saw HTB and *Alpha* as exercising too much control over those churches which simply wanted to use it as a tool for evangelism without necessarily being tied to adopting the whole package uncritically. Finally I asked him about the practice of defining people as non-Christians before they embarked on the course, even though they may have seen themselves as Christians before learning otherwise on the course (the process I have described earlier as ‘de-Christianizing’ - see Chapter Four). I supplemented this with putting to Gumbel Hunt’s point that *Alpha* basically recycles existing Christians.
The questionnaires and interviews which made up this stage of the research were all selected to utilize the experiences and reflections of people with first hand experience of Alpha or with special knowledge of it either as providers, consumers or observers of Alpha courses. The intention has been to shed light on the actual function of Alpha rather than relying purely on accounts from the promoters of Alpha or the impressions of clergy who may not be disinterested observers. In particular, the methods have been designed to see if Alpha measures up to its apparently educational claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life as this might be understood by people undertaking courses at an adult education centre and, if it does not, what its function might be. Such people might be at least as inclined as any other to be attracted by a course offering such an opportunity.
Chapter Eight - Data Analysis

This chapter analyses data derived from the questionnaires administered at an adult education centre, interviews conducted with individuals from the centre (both those who had not participated in an Alpha course and those who had), clergy and Alpha ‘graduates’ from two Anglican deaneries, an archdeacon, a bishop, an academic (Pete Ward) and the founder of Alpha (Nicky Gumbel). The data gathered is utilized to address the two research questions: Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life? and What is the function of Alpha’s teaching?

(i) The Adult Education Centre

(a) Questionnaire Responses

Eighty-three questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were completed in full or in part by adults attending evening classes at an adult education centre. The responses given are tabulated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 - Responses to questionnaires, omitting third question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaires attempted</th>
<th>83</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name given</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone number given</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (where given)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (where given)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group (where given)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha attended</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchgoers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-churchgoers</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The name and telephone number were used to contact respondents to arrange interviews. The gender and age data were in fact not used (see Chapter Seven) but such data could be relevant to future research (see Chapter Ten). The relevance of the last three classifications is explained in Chapter Seven and developed in the analysis below.

The third and key question, designed to test Alpha’s claim to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life was:

*If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like discussed under that heading, what would they be?*
This question brought the responses summarised in Table 2 below (see also Note to Table 2)

Responses to the question varied considerably, from a rejection of the whole idea of such a course, through slightly differently nuanced versions of the same issue on the same questionnaire, to five clearly distinct issues. Given the open-ended nature of the questionnaire, clear classification of responses required fine judgement and could not always be precise. Nevertheless, there was a clear consensus for the most popular issues.

Alpha is intended for non-Christians, which for Evangelicals means those who have not experienced a personal conversion, often couched in terms of having asked Jesus into their hearts. Until this personal conversion is experienced, the person is not ‘saved’, i.e. guaranteed their place in heaven. While Alpha may wish to distinguish between Christians and those who merely go to church, nevertheless Table 2 indicates that omitting the churchgoers from the questionnaire respondents brought a slight shift in issue priorities. While life after death remained the issue of greatest concern, those respondents who did not attend church appeared less interested in the issue of ‘many religions’ than they were in exploring why they are here. It is recognised, however, that this sample is small and unrepresentative, and gives hints rather than definitive conclusions.

Table 2 - Responses to the third question on questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues raised by more than one person</th>
<th>Frequency (all respondents)</th>
<th>Frequency (non-churchgoers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life after death</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many religions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are we here?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of God</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and Science</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem of evil</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the meaning of life</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How best to help other people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to cope with life’s problems</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of age to outlook on life</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of religion in human relationships</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Christianity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note to Table Two:
Where two or more ‘issues’ listed on a single questionnaire in effect raised the same issue in a different way this has only been included once. For example, “Why pain - acute physical; Why pain - chronic physical; Why pain -
psychological" has been recorded under ‘Suffering’ once. Four respondents stated that they would not attend such a course. Four wrote that they needed more time to think of anything, and thirty-one issues were raised by just one person, e.g., "The merits of political correctness", "Should human beings be the superior race?" and "Is tolerance something that can be taught?"

The substantial content of the course, i.e. the talks, is contained in Gumbel’s *Questions of Life* (Gumbel, 1993) and in the corresponding video tapes and audio tapes, discussed in detail in Chapter Five, and it is evident that none of the talks corresponds to the questions raised on the questionnaires. Nevertheless, there is some notable similarity between the most popular issues here and those Nicky Gumbel says are raised most frequently in the groups on *Alpha* courses and addressed in his book, *Searching Issues* (Gumbel, 1994b). Gumbel’s own research identified seven particular such issues, with ‘Suffering’ being the most frequently raised and ‘The Trinity’ the least. The table below (Table 3) lists these topics in order of frequency compared with the questionnaires, with bold print indicating commonality (though with the qualifications noted below). He does not intend, however, to integrate these issues into the talks.

**Table 3 - Topics raised on the Questionnaires compared with those addressed in Searching Issues** (Gumbel, 1994b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONNAIRES</th>
<th>SEARCHING ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life after death</td>
<td>Suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>Other religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many religions</td>
<td>Sex before marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are we here?</td>
<td>The New Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of God</td>
<td>Homosexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and Science</td>
<td>Science and Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem of Evil</td>
<td>The Trinity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There may be some indication here of the Christian make-up of the *Alpha* groups despite *Alpha*’s claim to be attracting non-Christians. The word ‘Other’ with regard to religions implies the centrality of Christianity, whereas the more egalitarian ‘Many’ implies no special place for any particular one. Similarly, the relationship of science specifically with Christianity rather than ‘religion’ is a narrower concern. The existence of God appears to be assumed amongst *Alpha* participants; not so in the case of many outside. Sexuality - in this case homosexuality - appears to be an issue of greater moral concern within *Alpha* than outside. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity was not a relevant issue to those outside *Alpha*. Again there appears to be a contrast here between the narrowness of *Alpha*’s concerns in practice - primarily of interest to an Evangelical Christian constituency - and the breadth of its public educational claim to offer an ‘opportunity to explore the meaning of life’. The latter accords more closely with the issues raised on the questionnaires than with those raised on the course (see Chapters Three and Five), or even with those raised in the sequel, *Searching Issues* (Gumbel, 1994b).
In the analysis of the interviews (see Appendices 2 and 3) which follows, those people from the adult education centre who had completed a questionnaire and agreed to be interviewed were given the opportunity to expand on their responses, i.e. the questions they would like to see raised on any course offering to explore the meaning of life. In the case of those who had not been involved in an Alpha course, they were then asked what they would make of a course which made such a claim but actually offered a version of Christianity. In the case of those who had been involved in an Alpha course, they were asked if the talks or the subsequent discussion groups dealt with the questions which were of concern to them. In both cases, as is apparent in the analysis, the interviewees were on the whole less than satisfied that their questions were really addressed.

The issues raised on the questionnaires were also put to the Alpha graduates located via the clergy, to see if they were addressed on the courses they attended. Again, as is apparent in the analysis, for the most part they were not.

Fourteen questionnaire respondents gave their telephone numbers and indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed, and it is this response which facilitated the next stage of the research.

(b) Interviews with people from the adult education centre who had not participated in an Alpha course

Of those fourteen from the adult education centre who were interviewed, ten had not participated in an Alpha course. For the purposes of this data analysis, these ten have each been given a code of reference as follows: S21, S22, S23, ........S210.

Of these ten, eight described themselves as Christians (though in the case of two of these, the responses were: “think so” and “hope so”). All eight of them described some sort of church background in their early years, though only four of them were currently churchgoers. Of the two who answered ‘no’ when asked if they would describe themselves as Christians, one was a churchgoer with a church background, and the other was not a churchgoer and disclaimed any church background.

The latter person (Code S27), having little or no church background, not describing herself as a Christian, and not being a churchgoer, could be seen as the archetypal individual for whom Alpha is intended, and a target for the offer: *An opportunity to explore the meaning of life*.

This person described herself as an agnostic, and although she didn’t see any purpose or meaning to life, she did believe that people should help one another, and society should be structured with a bias to the poor: “If there are people living in poverty in this country and in other countries, my own belief is that social systems should be skewed to helping them.” When asked what areas or subjects she would expect to be covered by any course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, she suggested: “Various philosophies of the purpose that we have in being on the
When asked whether such a course should include a look at different religions, or one religion, or whether religion should be kept out of it completely, she saw some difficulty with this, and pinpointed the confusion between explaining what a religion is about and advocating particular beliefs, or between education and evangelism:

It would be a very difficult course to do, because either it would be a course which said, 'Right, this is it, this is the way, this is the only way, that's it,' or else it's got to look at all of them. If you're just exploring ...... because basically people will either believe a religion or they won't. I'm not convinced that you can actually explain a religion to someone. You can explain the fundamentals of religion but you can't make them believe it. All you can do is say that's the only one, or you've got to look at the whole lot. That would be my view.

It is interesting that someone who has no particular involvement in adult religious education and holds no brief for any particular religious practice or belief should nevertheless identify this dilemma. Hence, when I went on to ask how she would respond if, on arrival at such an advertised course, she found it was a presentation of Christianity, she replied: "I would probably say, 'Goodness me, that was a con.' If it's going to be Christian, it should say it's going to be Christian."

This confusion between the closed-endedness which is on offer, and the open-endedness which this respondent seeks, reflects the debate at the heart of this research. It is discussed initially in the Introduction and Chapter One, and recurs throughout the present chapter and those that follow. It may be construed as a debate about the difference between what might be described as 'Christian education' and 'religious education', where the former offers a closed curriculum and is to do with nurture within the faith community, and the latter is a broader exploratory enterprise. Alpha may be seen as advertising the latter, but offering the former - and a narrow version of it at that.

The educationalist Peter Jarvis's makes this distinction by differentiating between what he calls the "classical curriculum" (offering specific "learning outcomes") and the "romantic curriculum" (offering "learning opportunities") (Jarvis, 2001, p.89). Jarvis similarly offers contrasting sociological definitions of religion, seeing it either as a set of answers to existential questions, or as a quest for truth. These contrasting ways of understanding religion will influence which kind of curriculum the churches offer in their educational programmes:

The classical curriculum might be related to churches teaching their own theologies and seeking to gain adherents to the faith, whereas the romantic curriculum is more concerned with providing people with opportunities to embark upon a religious quest and to learn, whatever the outcome of that process.
Consequently, two forms of religious education emerge: one which has a classical curriculum, where the Christian faith constitutes the curriculum and which might better be called 'Christian Education', whereas the other starts with the human quest to build a personal set of answers, has a romantic curriculum, and might better be regarded as 'religious education'.

(Jarvis, 2001, p.90).

The questionnaires used in the first part of the present research indicated that people both inside and outside the church were more concerned about the “human quest”, i.e. universal questions relating to the human condition (Is there life after death? Why is there suffering in the world?....) than they were about asking specifically ‘Christian’ questions of the type addressed by the Alpha course (Why and how should I read the bible? How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?....), a course which claims to be offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life - a claim which suggests a ‘human quest’ type of curriculum. Hence there appears to be a disjuncture between what is claimed to be on offer and what people actually find when they get there. In the case of the respondent cited above (S27) this would have led initially to disappointment.

However, Alpha’s strategy may well have been successful in recruiting this individual. S27 went on to say: “I might well stay there just out of interest, because I don’t know very much about Christianity.” She went on to describe the attraction she felt towards a religion which might appeal to the intellect rather than “divine revelation”. However, she did admit to responding to one particular manifestation of religious feeling. She spoke of her experience of doorstep evangelists:

The only one I’ve ever met who impressed me was a chap in Edinburgh - a really nice man - he turned up because he really thought I should go to the church because it made him terribly happy and he wanted me to be happy, and I thought that was ever so nice. I thought, if I was going to one, it would be his.

(S27).

This may imply that an appeal to the emotions will always be more successful than an appeal to the intellect, no matter what an individual may claim. Again, the warmth and welcome that people say they experience at Alpha courses may well have a wider appeal than the teaching which is on offer.

The other member (Code S24) of this group who claimed not to be a Christian, nevertheless was a churchgoer and had a church background. She would also be someone Alpha would see as a potential convert. For her, ‘Suffering’ was the main issue she would want to see raised on any course addressing the meaning of life. She had an acute awareness of suffering in the world and the impotence of the church and religious belief to do anything about it:
The church ...... it’s so narrow in many ways, in that I know there’s a lot more tolerance of things now, but Christians seem to say, ‘God will take care of you - this, that and the other, and only for the everlasting arms.’ That’s lovely, but how do you .... God is no more there for me than for the Indian baby dumped on a rubbish dump in Calcutta. Or people in Kosovo.

(S24).

She was also someone who often contemplated whether life has any meaning: “Oh yes, all the time I think you do that. All the time. I mean you couldn’t possibly avoid it with what goes on during the day can you? That just comes all the time.” Her concern with suffering and her reflections on life were clearly influenced by her own personal experience of caring for an elderly mother and a daughter with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME). These, and her experience in nursing homes meant that she had little time for some of the ‘explanations’ for suffering described in Gumbel’s *Searching Issues* (see Chapter Three):

The purpose of suffering in life - going back to that - it does teach people things - a certain kind of suffering. It doesn’t do people any harm to have to strive after things, and make big efforts. But real suffering ..... for instance, I’ve done some work in nursing homes and things like that ..... no, there is no point in suffering, not like some people go through it, none whatsoever, and certainly not for the person concerned, nor the people, the relatives who look after them or visit them or things like that. I don’t mean that life has to be all sugary - not that - but all this business about it making you a better person - it does for some people, but that shouldn’t really be necessary, I don’t think. That equates to God saying, ‘Oh, you’re not doing so well, don’t you think it’s time you had a bit of a struggle over the pain?’ It’s silly.

(S24).

When asked whether a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life should look at a number of different religions, one religion, or keep religion out of it, this interviewee opted for the first: “Can you do that? Can you keep religion out of it? I don’t know. I would think that would be very difficult. I think you should have several religions ..... all, well, as many religions as you like.” When asked how she would react if she went to such a course and found that the sole focus was on Christianity, she replied:

Suffering is common to everybody, isn’t it? So it couldn’t just focus ... that wouldn’t work would it? That would be arrogant again, I think, on the part of Christianity - to think that they had all the answers. You need to have as wide a perspective as possible.

(S24).
Of the eight who described themselves as Christians, five said that any course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life should look at "all" or at least "some" religions. Two wanted religion kept out of it, and one wasn't interested but just wanted "answers to my questions". When asked how they would react if they went along to such a course and discovered that it was a presentation of Christianity, one said he would react positively, one thought it would be OK but that some may feel they had been hoodwinked, and the others indicated that they would be disappointed and regard it as rather "narrow" or "arrogant" or "a con".

These interviews seem to indicate a disjunctive between what people, Christian or not, would understand by the phrase, 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life', i.e., a course which would include at least some exploration of what more than one religion might have to say on the issue, and what Alpha actually offers - namely a presentation of one version of Christianity (see Chapters Three and Five). There would also be disappointment in store for someone who turned up with these expectations.

(c) Interviews with people from the adult education centre who had been on an Alpha course

Four of those from the adult education centre who agreed to be interviewed had experience of being on an Alpha course. Two of these described themselves as being churchgoers, Christians, and as having had a church background; a third was not a churchgoer, described herself as an agnostic, and had a church background; and a fourth was not a churchgoer, described herself as an atheist ("but I don't want to be") and had no church background. Indeed, her father had been an atheist and proud of it. For the purposes of this data analysis, these respondents have been assigned the codes, S31, S32, S33, S34.

The first (Code S31) of these four came to go on an Alpha course through her existing church membership. She said that it did deal with the questions she had raised on her questionnaire (primarily "spiritual faith"). The course was run as a house group for existing church members ("which is not quite how it was envisaged"). She found it a positive experience in that it confirmed what she already thought. This confirmation was largely vested in the perceived authority of Nicky Gumbel:

What it's really done is confirmed what I thought, but it's come from somebody who has got the education and the academic certificates to say, 'I know what I'm talking about. I'm trained and I'm actively preaching and sharing this with other people', and that was what he did, and though I don't always agree with everything that he says, I think it's a positive experience to go on.

(S31).

Here is Alpha reinvigorating an existing church member. When asked about her reservations, she pointed to a narrow cultural appeal: "I felt it was talking to a particular group of people. They were articulate, they were well-dressed." When
asked about who it might appeal to most, she replied: “I would have said middle class and upwards really. I can see categories that could do with missionary work but it wouldn’t be done by Alpha.” Though generally a supporter of Alpha, she clearly saw a real problem here:

The other reason I think why it’s more middle class is that he talks about himself and he’s a Cambridge man. When you haven’t got any GCE’s and you haven’t got very much in life you might just resent listening to that because where’s the ordinary chap who gets up and does a manual job and doesn’t earn a lot and struggles to pay the bills? That sort of environment isn’t going to come across well.

(S31).

The possibility hinted at here between Alpha and social background might form the basis of future research (see Chapter Ten).

The most significant and controversial aspect of Alpha is the teaching on the Holy Spirit, in particular ‘speaking in tongues’, and the way this is dealt with on the special Weekend, or Day away. This interviewee was clearly disappointed with the lack of Holy Spirit activity in her group - having seen and heard all the teaching about it on the video (see Chapter Five). This had obviously created an expectation. She put this shortcoming down to the smallness of the group, the fact that all the members knew one another, and possibly the lack of orchestration that goes on when the Weekend or Day away is put on as it is at Holy Trinity Brompton or similar large Charismatic churches. Hence she unwittingly raised questions about the context apparently needed for manifestations of the Holy Spirit to occur. When asked if she could remember what the teaching was concerning the Holy Spirit, she replied:

Yes, it’s a whole day’s project, or a weekend, and it was done in three parts. It was very, very good, the talk about the Holy Spirit, because it took you through the bible readings, where the Holy Spirit came from and the story why it came - how Jesus died, came back and so forth. The next part talked about being full of the Holy Spirit - what it would mean to you. Then the third part was really using the Holy Spirit and sharing it with others. Now that is far more scary because it can be very off-putting if someone starts to talk about the idea of being filled with the Spirit. And I think too we lost that, being in a small group. Had we been in a group as Alpha was originally intended I actually felt we would probably see the Spirit moving within the group. In such a close group that we knew one another that didn’t happen, so I’m sure it would have been better had we gone to an Alpha course in the way that the whole course was intended.

(S31).
The second (S32) of these four was also a churchgoer, a Christian, and had a church background. She attended *Alpha* as a result of an invitation from within her church fellowship, hoping “it would give me a better understanding”. Most of the people there were “friends from church”. On her questionnaire she had outlined her main concerns as: “fulfilment in life”, “courage to overcome disasters and terminal illness”, and “faith in religious doctrine”. When asked if she felt her questions had been dealt with on the course, she replied:

Not really, no. It was mainly talk from the bible, Jesus’s life really, and different aspects in religion and different views that you might have as to other people. I’m not a hundred per cent sure that there’s only one God, because the different religions .... and in lots of ways there’s lots of good in different religions, aren’t there? (S32).

There was no Holy Spirit Day or Weekend, but she enjoyed the talks and found them quite stimulating, and enjoyed being amongst friends.

The third (Code S33) of this group of four from the adult education centre who had been on an *Alpha* course was not a churchgoer but did have a church background. She described herself as an agnostic. However, this self-description was largely a result of a conversation with her daughter who was an Evangelical Christian and had done an *Alpha* course: “I would always have described myself as Christian until talking with my daughter. Now I don’t think I am. Reluctantly I have to say that from my daughter’s argument. So I’m not a true Christian. I thought I was.”

This appears to be an example of the de-Christianizing process described earlier (see Chapter Four). This interviewee was invited to attend an *Alpha* course by her daughter, who hoped she would become a ‘real’ Christian. She “envied the certainty” of her daughter and son-in-law. When asked about her experience of being on the *Alpha* course, she replied:

I never really, truly felt part of it - ever. There were other outsiders. A lot of the people were from the church itself. The majority of the people were from the church itself. There were a lot of others - I’ll class them as outsiders - we weren’t intended to feel as outsiders. Everybody did their level best to include us. Perhaps I’m just too sensitive, but I did feel an outsider.

I didn’t feel there were other people like me. I felt I was looking at it with, if anything, a too academic, analytic point of view, and the kind of questions that I asked were from an academic point of view. Other people brought personal problems to the groups. I might have had a personal problem but there’s no way I’d have aired it. I did say to my son-in-law that I felt slightly uncomfortable in one of the groups because I felt that everybody believed, and I didn’t.
I felt it was the church having meetings with others there.
(S33)

The overriding impression given during the course of this interview was the interviewee’s wish to find something helpful, her envy of those who appeared certain in their faith, and her discomfort at the actual course. Despite changing her group on the course, she continued to feel an outsider, and felt that attempts were being made to engage her emotions but not her intellect. She was certainly impressed with Nicky Gumbel’s charismatic qualities:

I though he was the most charismatic teacher I’ve ever seen in my life. I’d heard about him before - years before - and I’d read about him in his Brompton .... and I thought he was absolutely wonderful and I could see how ... and my daughter and son-in-law and I had many discussions around the lunch table: me saying he was charismatic whatever - the kind of thing at church .... emotion .... when I go to that church I always cry. My daughter says it’s the Spirit visiting me; I say it’s emotion. That’s the kind of argument that we had, and I suppose you could say I’m still looking for proof. Nothing about that experience changed me although I got some very nice books to read and I’m trying now to read C. S. Lewis.
(S33).

When asked if the course tackled any of the questions she would have liked tackled, her response was largely negative, and she felt it was designed more to affirm the already convinced: “I felt it slid down on top of me. When we had discussions in the early part - that’s when I moved groups, and I’m sad that I did really, because I would have liked to have questioned later on. The chap who led this first group was so certain, so were the others that they didn’t .... it was just like an affirmation for them.” She did not go on the Holy Spirit Day, and her feelings about it were rather ambivalent: “I couldn’t go on that. A little bit of me was relieved, because I think I was frightened. I didn’t want to give away too much of myself.” There was a similar ambivalence when asked if she felt that the course had drawn her towards the Church in any way:

I think it’s made me realise I don’t necessarily ..... Yes, it possibly has, but I need to plough my own furrow. I think I feel uncomfortable with the kind of church that my daughter belongs to, and once I could get rid of that ... But it possibly has. It’s made me think, more on the positive side than on the negative side if you like; made me explore a little bit more, but not much.
(S33).

This interviewee is clearly a seeker and she is open to what Christianity may have to say on the most fundamental and universal human questions - the kinds of questions
with which all religions attempt to grapple ("the eternal ones: Why we’re here, Where we’re going, What we’re doing, Why?"). With a little prompting from her daughter, she responded to Alpha’s appeal in an attempt to find some answers. Her problem appears to be that she finds the version of Christianity on offer appealing only in part. She is probably unaware of other versions of Christianity, hence her (albeit reluctant) acceptance of her daughter’s judgement of her as ‘not a Christian’ because she does not match up to the Charismatic Evangelical criteria. She does have some sense of this, however, and said that if she did the course again she would like to do it “somewhere else - a Catholic one with a different point of view”. She was asked whether, in her experience, Alpha did offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. She replied: “No. Most definitely”. Rather, she thought it offered “an opportunity to begin to know more, to look at the bible with a modern viewpoint, and to exchange views, if you wanted to. I’m not sure the people taking the course knew how to answer the question - if they could handle those kinds of questions”.

The fourth interviewee (Code S34) in this group was not a churchgoer, had no church background (her father was a self-confessed atheist), and claimed to be an atheist herself, though reluctantly: “I suppose I’m an atheist, but I don’t want to be. But I can’t take on board Christianity and the other religions.” Again, as someone who was searching and open to what Christianity had to say, this interviewee could be seen as fertile ground for Alpha. She had in fact been on two Alpha courses. When asked how she came to go on Alpha, she replied:

Well, I’d been searching for a .... to .... accept religion so I went to the local church, trying hard to take on board Christianity and looking for answers to some questions that I’d developed. It was advertised, and so a friend said, ‘Oh, I’ll go with you.’ So I went on the first course and I didn’t really find it very helpful. I was too timid and sat there and didn’t really say anything. And they seemed to be going along, leaving me behind, and I didn’t like to hold them up.

(S34).

She was asked about the make-up of the group, and whether she felt others were in the same position as her. Her response indicates that she did indeed feel there were people engaged in the same exploration as her, but what happened next, and in particular her sense of isolation as a result of it, would raise doubts about whether they really were newcomers:

There were people quite like me, looking for answers to the meaning of life. And the second one, I did put my questions across. There was a feeling after the first or the second time I went that everyone else seemed to take on board what they were saying, and I didn’t, and they would say, ‘Oh, I can see the Spirit moving in you, and in you, and in you’, and then they came to me and it wasn’t moving in me! (laughter). So I’m the antichrist here!
(laughter), that it’s not moving in me! So I didn’t like, again, to admit ... I wasn’t really moving fast.
(S34).

When asked if there were others who felt the same, she said: “There could have been others, but no-one dared admit that the Spirit of the Lord wasn’t working within them. It’s peer pressure, I suppose. You feel, ‘What’s wrong with me? Why isn’t the Spirit of the Lord working within me when it is in all these other people?’”

The issues this interviewee would have liked to have seen addressed on the course concerned science and religion, whether or not religion has a place in the modern world, life after death, whether or not we need religion to live a good life, and ‘proof’. When asked whether or not she felt these questions had been tackled, she replied: “No. They said it’s written, and you must believe. Someone in the group would offer an explanation, then move on. I felt frustrated. I’d not really got myself anywhere. I didn’t find it persuasive or convincing.” She said that the course was not what she expected. Rather: “What they do is they catch you at the first day when they say, ‘Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?’ That’s the question they ask you, and at the end of that first session you have to say ‘Yes’, because that’s as far as it goes. It doesn’t explore that question any further. If you don’t get over that first hurdle then you’re not going to get anything out of the rest of the course.” She was asked whether she felt drawn to the church by the end of the course and whether or not she has kept going with that church: “They were so nice and they said, ‘Oh, come along’, so we went to a Christingle service, and we went because they said, ‘Come along’, but not because we felt there was a religious need. We haven’t been back.”

One other individual (S35) who had been on an Alpha course but left it part-way through was also interviewed. He is included at this stage rather than any other because, like the previous four and unlike those who follow, he was not located through a church. He was in fact found by accident. I met him for the first time in an entirely different context. He mentioned that he had participated in an Alpha course (though unaware of my research) and then agreed to be interviewed. By their nature, such Alpha ‘drop-outs’ are not easy to find and certainly do not form part of Alpha’s own research, and so was well worth interviewing. He described his parents as having been religious, and though he himself gave up any religious commitment as a child, he has maintained an interest in the whole realm of religion. Though he has not studied the subject academically, he clearly has a good deal of biblical knowledge and a critical mind. He described himself as: “Not Christian, but I believe there is a God up there”. An Alpha leaflet dropped through his door and he thought it might be interesting so went along to the course. He described his experience as follows:

It turned out they were all Christians. They’d all be discussing the bible. Someone would ask me what I thought. I told them, and then everybody challenged me. I didn’t like the chap who was leading it, and I gather quite a number of them didn’t either. The leader would say things which grated on me. He used the bible inconsistently.... He would say, ‘Well, we all know you can’t take
what's in the bible literally', and he's just said, 'These are the words of Jesus'.

There were some people there who had got themselves into a position where they'd believe anything the preacher says. They all seemed to be like-minded. There were no other enquirers. It was disappointing.

It was all quite jovial.

A comfortable discussion among like-thinking churchgoing people.

(S35).

He could not recall whether or not there had been a Holy Spirit Day (or Weekend) and said that his beliefs had not changed as a result of Alpha. When asked whether he felt the course offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, he replied: "As a title, it's very good. It doesn't really do it. It explores the church's view of Jesus."

When asked what questions he would like to see addressed on a course making such an offer, he suggested: "The discovery of space and how this relates to religion. That kind of thing. The church is talking to like-minded people."

Alpha does not appear to have met its claim for this group. It is evident that both the existing churchgoers found and enjoyed congenial and like-minded company on their course, and one individual thought it did answer her questionnaire issue about 'spiritual faith'. However, this really only amounted to a re-affirmation of her existing faith rather than any kind of new exploration. She was also doubtful of its reach beyond people like herself, socially and religiously speaking. The other churchgoer did not find her wider questions addressed at all. The third interviewee thought the course was essentially for churchgoers and never felt it really addressed her issues. Indeed she did not seem to think it was intended to address the wider and profounder questions at all - it was simply about affirmation of a viewpoint. The fourth was desperately seeking answers to her questions, but experienced pressure to conform to the prevailing religious ethos rather than any real attempt to address her concerns about profounder religious issues. The fifth person in this group had a similar experience of the church talking to itself and not really listening to the genuine concerns of those it was hoping to engage. These five (particularly the last three, being 'seekers') could be seen as a prime target for Alpha. However, none of this group was a genuine 'exploration' taking place. Ironically, had the Alpha course provided a genuine learning experience for them in which their questions were engaged, they might also have been inclined to explore further what the Church had to say about faith, and the Church's evangelistic agenda would also have been served. But the attempt to short-circuit this process resulted only in disappointment.
(ii) The Clergy

The most substantial part of the present research focussed on two Anglican deaneries in a large diocese in the south of England. As described in Chapter Seven, though geographically close, the two deaneries comprised quite different socio-economic areas.

The first of these, deanery ‘A’, was the more affluent, and five clergy in charge of different parishes in this deanery were interviewed. They have been assigned codes, AC1, AC2, AC3, AC4, and AC5. Three of them (Codes AC1, AC2, and AC3) had run Alpha courses in their parishes, and two of them (AC4 and AC5) had not. Broadly speaking, the parishes of AC1 and AC5 might be described as of central Anglican tradition with a liberal theological ethos, AC2 liberal (as opposed to conservative) Evangelical, AC3 Charismatic Evangelical, and AC4 quite strict conservative Evangelical. This is in fact quite a wide spread of theology and churchmanship within a small area.

Deanery ‘B’, a much larger deanery, was more urban and less affluent. Nine clergy were interviewed (Codes BC1, BC2 .....BC9). Seven of them had run Alpha courses (Codes BC1 - BC7) and two had not (Codes BC8 - BC9). Their churchmanship and theology were widely ranged.

They were each asked a series of questions to gauge their perceptions of the function of Alpha in their experience.

What are your thoughts about Alpha? Strengths and weaknesses?

Of those clergy who had run Alpha in Deanery A, AC1 was not naturally inclined to put on the course, but felt pressure to do so and had in fact run it three times. He was concerned that it mentioned nothing about the sacraments and was also concerned about the way it treats the Holy Spirit Weekend. Specifically: “Another parish provided the person who ran the Holy Spirit Weekend, and one girl, about twenty, was very distressed by what she perceived to be a lot of pressure on her. Since then we’ve modified it. If you modify the Holy Spirit Weekend it is a good learning experience.” He was also concerned about the danger of Alpha being a definer of sound practice with a certain kudos attached: “There is a cult of ‘doing Alpha’, if you’re not careful.” This echoes Pete Ward’s observation about the status attached to getting your church published in the Alpha News approved list of courses running (see interview with Pete Ward, below). AC2, though having liberal leanings was nevertheless evangelical enough to be an Alpha enthusiast and had run the course eight times: “Excellently packaged and put together. Presentation superb. Probably easier for those who have got some church background in their blood than those who come from right outside.” This also echoes earlier observations concerning the ‘recognition’ factor (see Chapter Two). For Alpha to engage the participant he or she would have to have some familiarity with the religious language used and probably at least some basic knowledge of the bible. AC3 was also an Alpha enthusiast. He saw
particular benefits in the social aspects of the course: “It provides a non-threatening environment for people to talk about Christianity. The meal is important - the socialising aspect.” He was, however, worried about the possibility of what he called “Gumbel-worship” and shared AC1’s concern about the ‘cult’ factor: “The ‘if you haven’t done Alpha then you’re not a real Christian’ syndrome.” He was also concerned about the middle class ethos and that there was too much emphasis on the gift of tongues.

Of those clergy who had run Alpha in Deanery B, BC1 saw Alpha as a good, general introduction to Christianity, but had some theological questions about its teaching on healing. BC2 felt she had been put under pressure to put it on. She did not think that the national and regional advertising had actually had any effect and that there was little interest from outside the church. She saw it as not really for new Christians and it didn’t result in great change. She described it as having required a lot of effort, but a disappointment. In particular she saw a lack of teaching on church life and worship and would like to have seen it widened. BC3 thought it wasn’t really for him but he did run a course ecumenically. He saw its main strengths as the brand image, the meal, and Gumbel’s qualities as a communicator. However, he had reservations about Alpha’s naive use of the bible, and the imbalance (towards Charismatic Christianity) in the teaching: “It [Alpha’s use of the bible] slides from reliability to quoting John [John’s Gospel] as if he had a tape recorder. It leads to one specific form of Christianity. It is Charismatic Christianity. The balance is interesting: you’ve got two sessions on the Holy Spirit, one on Jesus, and none on God the Father. You have more teaching on exorcism than on Communion.” BC4 also saw the meal, “that space”, and the “place to develop relationship” as the strengths, but the narrowness of what is on offer as a weakness: “Nicky Gumbel is giving a particular view of the Christian faith. He implies that we should expect miraculous cures most of the time. He personalises the devil. It is a bit black and white.” BC5 saw the meal as a strength but was worried about the narrowness of the cultural appeal, the pedagogical style, the pressure upon people to commit themselves, and its limited outreach to the unchurched:

The videos are culturally very yuppie and middle-class. The meal builds up relationships. There is always a tension between imparting things and having discussion. It gets down to the point of expecting people to respond far too soon, I think. You’ve just got to about week four and you’re asking people whether they feel they want to make a commitment. It’s very good for using with church members and people who have got some commitment already in terms of clarifying that commitment. I just wonder what it would do with totally unchurched people. (BC5).

BC6 also saw the meal and the associated informality as a strength, along with the fact that it is well-known, but also had reservations about the “class element”. He would like to have seen greater variety in the videos: “Some of the older people literally went to sleep.” BC7 was worried about the middle-class culture and that “the
people who were on the course on the video were the good-looking ones!”. The content “wasn’t bad” but he was worried about the teaching on the Holy Spirit, the pressure that some people might feel “to be at particular points” and the danger of a “personality cult”.

Of the two in Deanery A who had not run Alpha, AC4 was the vicar of a conservative Evangelical church (which therefore might have been expected to be a supporter of Alpha) but had taken the decision not to run it. He explained: “It’s deficient in its view of sin. A more Charismatic agenda. It moves very quickly to a discipleship course when you go to the Holy Spirit Weekend, whereas my experience has been that it takes people a lot longer to come to Christian conversion.” The other, AC5, speaking from a much more liberal theological perspective, saw Alpha as too narrow. It was also evident that he had read Pete Ward’s article about Alpha (Ward, 1998):

Too packaged. It didn’t ask some of the questions I felt people wanted to ask. It was just a turn-of-the-century version of ‘brother are you saved?’ from the fifties; just the whole thing repackaged. McDonaldization of religion. It didn’t start with whether there is a God, creation, the basic questions, where people are. ‘This is it. If you don’t take it, you’ve had it.’

In Deanery B, BC8 and BC9 had not run Alpha, but were familiar with it. BC8 was aware of courses going on in the area when he arrived, and discovered that: “All the people in it were church members already committed. Its obvious strength is its massive advertising campaign. It’s clearly an HTB [Holy Trinity Brompton] package. Charismatic. It doesn’t hit home until you come to the Holy Spirit sessions.” This latter point is particularly significant in that it underlines again how many churches are clearly reasonably happy with the course up until the Holy Spirit sessions, when the Charismatic element comes to the fore. It is this particular element that conservative Evangelical churches and other non-Charismatic churches have difficulty with and either change, gloss over, or omit completely, none of which is permissible under the terms of the copyright statement. BC8 saw the massive advertising campaign as Alpha’s obvious strength but saw the meal as too middle class. He also noted the central importance of the group leader and that the course was rather expensive to run. BC9 was worried about the “mechanistic pneumatology” (“the Holy Spirit will arrive at five minutes past three....”) and saw Alpha as sometimes damaging to people emotionally, and disempowering:

My experience of Alpha: a certain amount of patching people up, counselling, picking up pieces; which is not really what Alpha normally claims. My interest is much more in a collaborative form of ministry in which we are fellow pilgrims, rather than one in which I give you a potted message. I’m not sure I like the power relationships in Alpha. I am very scared of the attitude of elite Christianity. Anything which involves listening to a tape for any length of time, to me distorts the power relationship that there should be. Anything that takes a particularly narrow view of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not about empowering the people but actually disempowering them.
How effective has *Alpha* been?

This question was deliberately left open to enable the respondents to interpret 'effective' in whatever way they wished. Most clearly saw the desired effect as being to draw new people into the church, rather than its claimed 'exploration' but thought its success even in recruitment terms was very limited. Three of the ten clergy who had run the course saw it as having had some impact amongst unchurched people, for example:

Three or four people in the course - about ten per cent - have come from outside.

(BC4).

The few total outsiders who have been in - it's been very effective and people have made responses and found it very clear.

(BC5)

Most, however (including those three) saw its main function as being within the existing church, for example:

It has met a need for a relatively small group of people each year. I don't think it has drawn in anyone completely unchurched.

(AC1).

Hardly anybody who wasn't a church member already. Helped Christians to get a clearer picture of Christianity. Not very effective in this church.

(BC6).

Two clergy thought it had drawn in some people on the 'fringe' of the church - some of whom were Confirmed as a result of it, for example:

Quite effective. Five Confirmed last year. They were people we'd been in touch with for some time through a variety of means.

(AC2).

One person going forward to Confirmation.

(BC1).

People who are already involved in church seem to go through *Alpha* first. It brings in people on the edge of church life. We do have some people who come from nowhere, as it were - not in vast spectacular numbers. Even if it doesn't lead to conversion in the traditional sense of the word, it certainly moves people along,
gives them food for thought, is of value even to people who have no real church background.

(AC3)

One noted a few people who had dropped out of the course part-way through:

Inevitably there have been those people who have come two or three times and then not carried on with the course.

(AC2)

How do you account for its apparent numerical success?

AC1 felt it filled a gap in the Church of England’s teaching provision. AC2 thought that the numbers were “ninety-five percent church people if we’re honest”. He was also cautious about all the success stories in Alpha News: “You don’t get records of the courses which didn’t happen because there weren’t enough people.” He put its success down to the sociability of Alpha: “There’s a lot of humour and fun and relaxed atmosphere. The recipe is good in terms of the meal, the discussion groups, the input and the accessibility.” AC4, who had not run the course and had reservations about the course’s weakness on “the sinfulness of the human heart”, nevertheless pinpointed what he saw as its strengths: “Nicky Gumbel is an able communicator. The meal idea is excellent, as is using people on the course as marshalling agents. It has caught the particular times. As a concept it is brilliant.” AC5, who had not run the course, had suspicions about the numbers quoted by Alpha and its supporters: “Are these totally new people? Often they are people who have been dissatisfied with their own church and have gone round looking for something stimulating and exciting.”

Of those clergy in Deanery B who had run the course, BC1 saw Alpha as “a good social thing”, while BC2 thought there were psychological limits to its appeal: “It works where people are ready for it and those questions are relevant. For some it closes down and make things safe.” The latter comment reinforces the suspicion of closed-endedness - that what is in on offer is a package that leaves no room for disturbing questions, though there is a “clarity of teaching” (BC4), which may appeal to many. BC3 saw “the brand image” and the meal as the reasons for its popularity, and BC4 added that it was “user-friendly”. BC5 echoed this latter sentiment: “It provides a package for churches who are not quite sure how to do evangelism or who have few resources. Also, Christians are good at latest crazes.” BC6 put the numerical success down to marketing and image, and thought: “It does address the questions some people are asking”, though he had already stated that his course included “hardly anybody who wasn’t a church member”. This suggestion of the numerical success being largely due to marketing and church members was echoed by the non-Alpha clergy in this Deenery, BC8 and BC9. BC9 also saw problems: “The jury’s out. I can see how it has caused division in one church, and I can think of another neighbouring church where it is causing potential division, where the incumbent is having to doctor it very considerably.”
Alpha claims to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you think it lives up to that claim?

This is the central claim, made public on all the posters and literature and which has remained unchanged for several years. It is the claim which the creators of Alpha clearly hope will appeal to the unchurched. Of the fourteen clergy interviewed, five answered ‘No’ to this question, three answered a clear ‘Yes’, and six gave a qualified ‘Yes’. The latter mostly expressed the view that the issue was explored, but within a fairly narrowly defined context, i.e. that of a particular kind of Christianity.

Examples of the clear ‘No’ would be:

Should include: ‘Is there a purpose beyond the universe? What are we here for? Ways of dealing with the problems of the world. Green element’.

(AC5).

Not at all. Talking as an organisation apparachik, it has its tempting side, and if I wanted a short-cut, an instant solution (just add water and pop in the oven), yes, I’d be very tempted.

(BC9).

Examples of the clear ‘Yes’ would be:

It does tap into those fundamental ‘meaning of life’ type questions and put a Christian perspective on that in a fairly acceptable kind of way. It does live up to that claim.

(AC3).

A fair claim.

(BC1).

Examples of the qualified ‘Yes’ would be:

It doesn’t address the questions people here are asking. It has bounded the question of the meaning of life within its own understanding of Christianity - a ‘safe’ Christianity.

(BC2).

Yes and no. It is giving a very clear Christian, biblical, Charismatic understanding of the Gospel. It’s not starting from where people are.

(BC4).

It is evident from the clergy responses, that even Alpha’s strongest supporters amongst them did hesitate before giving an unqualified and enthusiastically positive response to the question. At most they thought the claim was ‘fair’, but could see why
others might have difficulty with that. They were conscious of their own Christian presuppositions but were unapologetic about them. Their enthusiasm for their mission apparently allowed them to find acceptable interpretations of the phrase.

**What sort of topics would you want to see covered in a course designed to introduce the unchurched to Christianity?**

*Alpha* is sometimes presented as a course in the basics of Christianity for those who are not Christians. This question was intended to see how *Alpha* measured up in the opinion of the clergy interviewed:

Five clergy would have liked to have seen more discussion of the existence and nature of God, two of these pointing out the importance of taking seriously people’s existing views. Four thought *Alpha* was lacking in study of the sacraments. Three would have liked more attention paid to social and ethical issues such as war and peace, Christian lifestyle and sexuality. Three would also have liked to see more study of the Bible, though views as to the form this should take varied; the more evangelical clergy wanted emphasis on the claims of Christ and the reliability of Scripture, while others thought there should be less emphasis on John’s Gospel and Paul’s epistles (which tend to be the sources for an Evangelical penal substitution theory of atonement) and more emphasis on the synoptic gospels, particularly the ‘sermon on the mount’ where there appears to be a greater ethical emphasis. There were ten other issues raised by individual clergy, such as church history, prayer, and some recognition of other faiths. Two clergy thought the *Alpha* course was about right as it was.

**How would you introduce someone to the Christian faith? How does evangelism work best?**

There was a broad consensus that this occurs through personal contact and personal relationship, integrating individuals into the church. It happens naturally through friendship, but ought not to be forced. It was also thought that it is important to try to gauge where someone is theologically and be flexible about how to engage with them. There was also the importance of being an attractive example: someone of integrity who was known as a Christian. This seems to suggest that the meal and the relationships formed on an *Alpha* course may be more important than the teaching given in the talks and the issues discussed in the groups.

This communal meal was often cited by those interviewed as a key ingredient in *Alpha*’s success. (For a discussion of the significance of the communal meal, see Chapter Three).

**Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Do you see any difference between religious questions and Christian questions? If so, which should the church be involved in?**
These questions were designed to tease out the thinking of these clergy interviewees on the church’s educational and evangelistic roles. Does *Alpha* only really deal with internal Christian questions, i.e. the sort of questions that would be more likely to interest only those already inside the church, e.g., ‘How does God guide us?’, ‘What does the Holy Spirit do?’? If it really is offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, should it be exploring the more universal religious and human questions, e.g., ‘Is there a God?’, ‘Does life have any meaning?’ Is it the church’s task to tackle these larger questions and, if so, how should it be done?

Most thought that the church should be engaged in both adult religious education and adult Christian education, with some seeing a difference, and some no difference between them. For example:

In the minds of many people there is a difference. Those concerned with Christian education are more the Evangelical and fundamentalist groups. Religious education encompasses the Christian and gives scope for a wider exploration. The church should be engaged in the big questions but not in the business of giving easy answers. Part of being human is to seek out and question and explore. The church’s contribution should be to give people space to explore those questions and the ability to listen.

(BC2).

I don’t see any difference. It’s questions of life. My attitude in church is the same as outside. ‘Both and’.

(BC1).

However, this was not universal. One interviewee believed it was clearly the task of the church simply to promote Jesus Christ:

*Alpha* is undoubtedly Christian education, if it’s education at all. The church should be involved in Christian education. The raison d’être of the church is to promote Jesus Christ.

(AC3).

Two thought that getting embroiled in a discussion of these profound issues might actually be an exercise in self-indulgence and a way of avoiding the personal. For example:

Christianity is about the whole of life. We shouldn’t be engaged in addressing either type of question. They (religious questions) can be used as debating points but will not move people forward at all.

(BC9).
How important is numerical growth for the church?

*Alpha*’s enthusiasm for numbers of participants and converts has been described elsewhere in this thesis (see esp. Chapters Two and Six). Its claims of numerical success may be designed particularly to appeal to the nervousness of churches facing a decline in attendance figures. The implication is clearly that putting on *Alpha* courses will increase a church’s congregation. The clergy were therefore asked how important they thought numerical growth was for the church.

Opinions varied too widely for any consensus to emerge. Some thought it important; some thought it quite important but not as important as personal spiritual growth; some suggested that clergy actually regarded it more importantly than they were prepared to admit; and some thought it unimportant and, historically speaking, a relatively recent concern dating only from the first church attendance census in 1851.

Other Comments?

The clergy were then asked if they had any other comments to make about *Alpha*. Concern was expressed about perceived pressure put on people by the Holy Spirit Weekend to be “Spirit-filled” in a demonstrable way, and how people might be made to feel guilty or second-class Christians if they didn’t conform. One pointed out that the fact that *Alpha* devoted three sessions to the Holy Spirit and only one to a number of other topics left him thinking “it was a bit biased”. *Alpha* should be seen as a tool, it was pointed out by another, not as a panacea. It is “right for some places”, but it is not “God’s gift to the world”, although “some of its publicity would suggest that it is.” Another was clear that “it will not automatically lead to growth”. It was also re-emphasised by others that *Alpha* did not address the real questions people were asking about suffering, the problem of evil, other faiths, the existence of God and indeed the existence of the universe. One feared that people outside the church saw it as “just bible bashing”, and this meant that some who started the course would not come back. Another suspected the course was not really going for the unchurched at all but was simply building on prior knowledge. Another described *Alpha*’s questions as being of a “particularly narrow, churchy kind”. Two more pointed out that we are not “all agreed” that *Alpha*’s are the real basics for everyone. Concern was also expressed about *Alpha*’s triumphalism.

The overwhelming impression gleaned from the clergy then, was one of ambivalence. Generally speaking, the more Evangelical the disposition of the clergyperson, the more likely (with the exception of one) they were to be supportive of *Alpha*. However the perceived recruitment potential had meant that clergy with theological reservations had also run the course, even though they might not have embraced it quite so enthusiastically. But even the enthusiasts were aware of its limitations, and all saw it as operating most effectively within the existing church. The clergy’s perception of the extent to which it met its claim of ‘offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’ was also very mixed, and even amongst those who replied positively, there was always restraint, and frequently qualification involving the Christian context. When asked more directly about the educational and
evangelistic tasks of the church the overwhelming majority of the clergy saw both as being important, but the broader issues which tackling the former task would necessitate were perceived as really beyond Alpha's curriculum.

(iii) The Alpha Graduates

Through the clergy interviewed, forty-one Alpha graduates (people who had attended an Alpha course in whole or in part) were located and interviewed (see Chapter Seven). Twenty-two of these were from deanery A and nineteen from deanery B. These were coded, AL1, AL2 ...AL22, and BL1, BL2, ...BL19, respectively.

To ascertain their religious background, they were first asked:

Tell me a little about your own background as far as the church is concerned, e.g., Brownies / Cubs / Sunday School / School / Youth Club / Parents, etc. Were you a churchgoer before you did the Alpha course?

Alpha is intended to reach the unchurched. This question was intended to help discern if this was true of the interviewees. It yielded the responses given in Table 4 below.

Table 4 - Church background of Alpha Graduates interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Church Background</th>
<th>No Church Background</th>
<th>Churchgoer immediately prior to Alpha</th>
<th>Not a churchgoer immediately prior to Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deanery A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanery B</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, then, an overwhelming proportion of Alpha graduates interviewed had a church background and were churchgoers already. This seems to accord with suggestions that Alpha appeals mostly to those who are already involved in the life of the church rather than those outside the church (Alpha's target group), and that it therefore has limited reach, whether for educational or evangelistic purposes. Any newcomer is going to find himself or herself in a small minority and possibly alone in the group.

How did you come to go on the Alpha Course?

This question was also designed to give an indication as to whether the interviewees were already 'inside' the church.

Of the forty-one Alpha graduates interviewed, nine went on the course as a result of a direct personal invitation from the minister of their church, and twenty-four as a
result of internal church publicity. Thus thirty-three (eighty percent) could be said to have been recruited internally by their churches. Three joined the course as a result of a leaflet through their doors, one through an ‘engaged couples weekend’ run by a particular church, two through invitations from their respective spouses (who were already church members), one through an invitation from a friend, and one through an invitation from a sister-in-law. Thus, only eight (twenty percent) could be said to have been recruited from outside the church (though this is three more than the five who claimed not to be churchgoers - see above). Only three of these (seven percent - those who had the leaflet dropped through their doors) could be said to have been attracted as a result of Alpha publicity, and this was produced locally. None claimed to have come as a result of the Alpha poster campaigns. No comparison has been made between the effectiveness of this and any other kind of ‘leaflet drop’ publicising a church event. That would be another way of assessing the unique appeal of Alpha but is beyond the scope of the present research. Again, these samples are not intended to be conclusive, but simply indicate that Alpha appears to be operating overwhelmingly within existing church circles, certainly within these two deaneries, despite its intended target.

What was your first impression when you turned up? Were there others like you? What did you make of the people you met? What sort of proportions were churchgoers and non-churchgoers?

This question was designed to discover the interviewee’s perception of the make up of the course in terms of churchgoers and non-churchgoers, and how they saw themselves in relation to the group.

Eight of the forty one (twenty percent) thought that the course was made up entirely of churchgoers. Twenty-six (sixty-three percent) thought it was largely churchgoers. Others gave answers that were less clear, for example because they wished to make finer distinctions: “Some, I would have said quite frankly were not Christians. They might have thought they were, but they weren’t” (AL12); “Churchgoers, but not committed” (AL20). One interviewee wished to distinguish between the first and second times she had done the course: “The first time we [she and her husband] did it, it was mainly people like us - new to the church. When we helped, it was all non-church in our group” (AL29). Another interviewee wished to differentiate on grounds of age: “The older people were already committed to the church. The younger ones - a minority - were coming into the church and starting from new” (AL6). (‘Age’ as a factor in Alpha’s appeal does not feature in the present research, but could form an area for future research - see Chapter Ten). Another described the changing clientele of consecutive courses. The direction appears to be ‘outward’ then ‘inward’: “A good proportion were likely to have been people who attended church semi-regularly. The last course was mainly non-churchgoers who had been married at the church or who had had their children baptized or whatever. The course we’re running now is people who come to church fairly regularly but who want to deepen their faith” (AL13). Another also described a change from one ‘session’ to another,
but in the opposite direction: "I was the only one who did not believe at all. The second session was a different group with some non-Christians" (BL10).

One interviewee (BL13), who dropped out part way through, was on a course made up entirely of PCC members (Parochial Church Council - a Church of England statutory body of elected representatives with administrative responsibilities for their local church) who had decided to do the course first. Three interviewees identified others who had dropped out: "All were churchgoers except one. She didn’t come back" (BL15); "There were two non-Christians. One left" (BL18); "All were churchgoers except for one who wasn’t a Christian. He didn’t finish the course. He said it wasn’t for him. His wife comes to church" (BL16). Any who were from outside the church must have been conscious of their minority status and the expectations placed upon them: "They were Christians, but there were new people. One non-Christian. She resisted to be converted. Everybody else in the group was a Christian" (BL12). One interviewee clearly felt intimidated by the biblical knowledge of others in her group: "They could recite passages of the bible. I would have asked a lot more questions" (AL10). Another was unsettled to discover she had been the object of prayer: "A couple told us they had prayed for us last night. It shook us rigid" (AL7). Clearly all these estimates and observations of people’s churchgoing habits and Christian beliefs were very impressionistic and subjective on the part of the interviewees. However, how they saw themselves and how they felt they fitted into the group (or not) are important. Their perceptions of what they encountered are significant. If one believes oneself to be in a group of largely like-minded people, that is likely to affect one’s emotional state and susceptibility differently from how one might be affected by perceiving oneself to be in a minority of one, being prayed for or argued with by all the others.

What did you make of the talks? Did you find the speaker / video persuasive?

This question was designed to elicit the respondents’ general impression of the talks.

The talks were overwhelmingly favourably received. They were most commonly described as “informative”, “interesting”, “excellent”, “enjoyable”, “fascinating”, “persuasive”, “comprehensive” and “good”. They were also described by individuals as “easy to understand”, “well-structured”, “mind-blowing”, “entertaining”, “real life”, “powerful”, “rational”, “professional”, “irrefutable logic”, and “simple”.

Five respondents were less satisfied, describing the talks as “not persuasive”, “superficial”, appealing to “a narrow band of society”, with “not much depth” and thought they “assumed too much”. One failed to see the connection between the talks and what went on in the groups. A few found Nicky Gumbel’s persona difficult: “I found I was looking at the beautiful displays of flowers behind him rather than looking him in the eye in the video..... He smiled too much. Sometimes I found that smile a bit cynical” (BL1); “We found Nicky Gumbel rather alarming and slightly drastic” (BL8); “I didn’t find myself particularly warming to the chap - Nicky Gumbel....... The set-up seemed to me to be slightly staged. There was an audience
which seemed to me to reflect a very narrow band of society” (AL3). The severest
critic of the talks thought Alpha did not really tackle the problem of Christianity’s
detractors: “I think there are a large number of people who think the whole thing
[Christianity] is rubbish, and it struck me that Alpha was not tackling that. His
arguments were weak and badly presented. You have to find out what your hearers
think first, and they didn’t” (BL13).

AL8 saw the talks as a “history lesson”, which AL9 saw as an antidote to
“Darwinism”: “Absolutely mind-blowing. They [the talks] were factual, informative,
funny. I think it’s a good balance with the teaching you get in life and school. I
remember going to school and they would teach, for example, Darwinism, as if it
were fact. You don’t ever get a balance. Alpha’s a very good balance to that” (AL9).
Given the church background of the course members, it is not particularly surprising
that so many found themselves in agreement with the talks, as expressed by one:
“Excellent. I’ve read the talks in the book as well. It was pretty much along my line
of thinking” (AL16). One enthusiast mentioned that she had been “to half a dozen
courses”. Both these conditions raise questions about the claimed numbers doing
Alpha courses and the extent to which it is actually reaching new people. One
respondent apparently noticed this latter difficulty: “I did feel that it skated rather
quickly over the basic pre-conversion stuff” (BL4). Another also thought it assumed
too much: “The video assumed you accepted the existence of God” (BL18). But it did
appear to give most participants what they wanted: “I had gone knowing it was a
Christian basics course. I didn’t particularly want anything intellectual or whatever.
Although I now have a deep faith, it’s a very simple one. That’s how I like it to be”
(BL16).

How did you find the group discussions? What sort of questions
came up?

The Alpha group discussions are intended for participants to raise any issue they wish
without fear of censure. As such this could be seen as the provision of an open
educational or learning experience. This question was designed to give an indication
of how this worked out in practice and to see if any of the questions which people
said they wanted to see raised on any course claiming to offer an opportunity to
explore the meaning of life actually arose in the groups.

On the whole the group discussions were very much enjoyed, with comments such as
“lively” and “interesting” featuring frequently. People had difficulty remembering
specific issues which arose, but seemed to find the groups instrumental in forming
relationships between people as they shared their personal stories. As with the talks,
given that the majority of participants were already church members there was,
unsurprisingly, a lot of agreement (“Your ideas and beliefs were reinforced” (BL3);
“I agreed with the leader. It was difficult to find questions” (BL11)) and in some
cases it was difficult to get any conversation going at all at first. BL14’s group, for
example, were of one mind: “I had many Christians in my group and I think there
were a couple who were getting their faith renewed by being on the course, but
there's nothing [issues raised] that stands out in my mind. I think we were all just
talking about: ‘Isn’t it wonderful!’ I had a very easy group from that point of view. I can’t remember any real issues that came up.” However, there were a few exceptions, for example BL12: “There was never agreement; always argument against what had been said.” Those less involved in the life of the church, however, found the majority agreement unhelpful, and in some cases felt intimidated by Christians in the group and heavy-handed leaders who quoted the bible a lot. Some felt that, far from being open, the leaders were in fact following a script, and preferred that group members cooperated. There were stories of individuals leaving. There was anxiety about the teaching on the Holy Spirit, and some had heard worrying stories of what went on at Holy Spirit Weekends. Subjects which respondents could remember discussing were: The Trinity, Suffering, Satan, Whether the bible was a hoax, Forgiveness, Evil, Other religions, Salvation, Fortune-telling and Mediums. AL1 saw the discussions as a “freeing time”, AL4 came out “still struggling a bit”, AL5 thought “people opened up as time went on”, as did BL4. AL8 thought it took time “to get to know one another”, and AL12 noted that “people have heard very funny stories of what happens on a Ministry Weekend and are actually expecting something very bizarre”. AL14 “felt uncomfortable” because it got “too religious”, and AL15 “felt out of my depth”. AL16 found the experience “initially unnerving” and “there was a lot of going back into childhood and they said how their parents had brought religion into the family. Some had had a bad experience.” AL19 thought “it would have been a lot more interesting if everyone had been a non-Christian”. AL20 (not a recent churchgoer) clearly found the group difficult at first: “The first week was hard. There were a couple of leaders who were committed Christians and I felt intimidated to ask questions. Everybody kept telling me that you have to fear God; and I said, Why should I fear God? God loves me. And I was hammered then by two committed Christians straight away, which really did knock me for six, because I believed I was allowed to go in and ask any question. When we did go into smaller groups, it was a lot better.” BL6 was one of many who thought that “relationships are a strong part of the ethos of Alpha”, but AL21 was one of a few who felt that the group discussions were not as open as claimed: “Lively. I enjoyed them. I remember being sensitive to the fact I was treading on other people’s toes. I backed off a bit. Mostly my questions were welcomed. The leader was trying to steer a particular path and found it frustrating. I wouldn’t go the way he wanted. That was a little prescriptive, I thought. I almost got the impression he’d got a script there.” BL9 thought it was hard work and was “drained by the end of the evening”. Others found it less demanding: “The church has complicated Christianity. It’s actually very simple” (BL18).

The respondents were then asked specifically whether the six issues most frequently raised on the questionnaires came up in the groups they were in. These were put to them one at a time: ‘The problem of suffering’, ‘The existence of God’, ‘Many religions’, ‘Science and religion’, ‘Life after death’, and ‘Why are we here?’. This question was designed to detect whether the issues people would expect to be dealt with on a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life were actually addressed. They were also asked if anything helpful was said on each issue. The responses are useful not so much for their accuracy in defining precisely what took place (they were, after all, people’s memories) as in understanding the
perceptions of the participants as to what took place and the way in which they felt that the issues were dealt with.

'Suffering', 'The Existence of God'
Thirty-five of the forty-one said that the issue of 'Suffering' came up in their group. This was by far the most popular issue. Four of these thirty-five couldn’t recall anything that was actually said on the subject, and five said that very little, nothing specific, or only 'a bit' was said. It was clear that some individuals in the groups shared their own experiences of suffering, and that was found useful by others - probably more so than any attempts at 'explanations'. Points were made about God allowing it, testing us, bringing good out of it, human free will and culpability, God suffering alongside us, and ultimately our lack of knowledge about why it exists. Clearly many found the discussions useful, though nobody reported having heard anything new or being persuaded to a new understanding. Neither did anyone suggest that the 'problem' of suffering only exists if one assumes the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God. This appears likely to be because the existence of such a God was assumed by the overwhelming majority of participants. This was certainly evident in the responses to the question about the existence of God. Such a belief was “accepted”, “taken as read”, and “a foregone conclusion”. As AL16 put it: “You could almost take it as read that God must exist if you’re going to move anywhere forward in that course.” The course certainly focuses on Jesus as being the Son of God, so, as BL5 put it: “it follows that if you believe that, then God exists”.

'Many Religions'
Twenty-six of the forty-one reported that the subject of 'Many religions' had arisen in their groups. Three of these said they could remember little or nothing of what was said. Views expressed varied between scepticism towards the exclusive claims for Christianity made by some in the group, and a conviction that Christianity is the only way, based on an acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God. AL21 captured both these views: “There were a couple of very devout people in our group who were really adamant that this was the only religion in being, and I really do struggle with that, so we had quite a lively discussion. I see that as arrogance. How on earth can you think that you’re the only one who can be right about this?” AL4 perceived a clear line on this issue coming out of the Alpha course: “A general focus on Jesus as the way. As long as the religions do that then..... you know - he is the way, so therefore that’s OK. For other religions who do not accept Jesus - even if they accept him as a prophet - there is no way. I think that is the distinction.” However, this was an issue with which even the committed struggled. In general it was either left open or the exclusive claims of Christianity were seen as paramount.

'Science and Religion'
The question of 'Science and religion' was also remembered by twenty-six of the forty-one as having arisen, although the way it was handled varied enormously from one group to another. It often arose where there was one particular enthusiast, in which case the rest of the group either remained uninterested or couldn’t understand the points being made. In some cases the discussions became highly technical, while in another it simply involved asking how dinosaurs fitted in with the Genesis account
of Creation. There were comments about God guiding scientists, the remaining necessity for faith, the fact that many scientists are also religious, and the evidence for Noah’s Ark. No-one, when asked, found the conversations particularly helpful. Many simply saw hobby-horses being exercised.

‘Life after Death’, ‘Why are we here?’
The issues of ‘Life after death’ and ‘Why are we here?’ were recalled as having arisen by twenty-two people and twelve people respectively. Again, individuals struggled to remember anything that had been said, and little had made much impact. Overall, it appears that though these issues were not dealt with in the talks, they still arose in the group discussions; but without any detailed input (of the sort given in the talks on other issues) the conversations clearly lacked depth.

In contrast to those who completed the questionnaires and who might be regarded as Alpha’s target group, those who are already committed do not appear to find these the most important issues. As was evident from my interview with Nicky Gumbel (see below), he would regard the inclusion of these issues in the talks as putting Christianity on the defensive, and therefore wasting time and not being helpful for evangelism. However, they remain the primary issues, within the limitations of the present research, which people would expect to be dealt with on a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.

Have you been on the Holy Spirit Day / Weekend? What happened and what did you think of it?

Probably the most controversial aspect of the Alpha course is the teaching about the Holy Spirit and the way that the Holy Spirit Weekend (or Day) away is conducted and experienced. It is here that the Charismatic nature of the course and the church which produced it (Holy Trinity Brompton) become most apparent. There is an emphasis on ‘Speaking in Tongues’ (Glossolalia), and physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit coming upon people. The teaching and expectations of the Weekend are well documented in the Alpha literature and are discussed elsewhere in this study (see esp. Chapters Three and Five). This question was asked to discover indications of whether Alpha’s teaching on the subject is actually conveyed in practice and, where it is, to discover how people experienced it, thus further illuminating the actual function of Alpha’s teaching.

Some of the respondents had not been able to go on the Holy Spirit Day, and on the whole regretted it, feeling that they had missed out on something important. AL2 had been on several Holy Spirit Days, initially as a course member and subsequently as a leader. She described her first one:

There was teaching in the morning about the Holy Spirit and then after lunch the vicar said, ‘Right, we’ll get down to business,’ and he prayed and asked the Holy Spirit to come generally. Then he ministered to each and every one to receive the Holy Spirit into their lives if they were open so to do. Some did, some didn’t. Some
had a very warm, pleasant experience, because afterwards you shared the experience. Others had quite a violent experience - extreme experience. One person in particular did. She seemed to be taken over in a way that was not a gentle way. There seemed to be a conflict inside her. She became almost catatonic. I think she had a problem within her. She was the exception. There was shaking, there were tears, there were people who were prostrate, there were others who were just being bathed in the Spirit and very peaceful. (AL2).

She was then asked about other Holy Spirit Days she had been on. She was clearly quite experienced:

I've now been a leader on about five, I think. Each of the Days there's been quite a blend of tears, people just being blessed, very happy, very peaceful, very gentle, washing over for them. Some people, it's relieved them of things there have been in the past. They then wanted to go off and talk about things. Some people have ended up speaking in tongues straight away. Some people have been bubbling over with joy and laughter. (AL2).

She clearly regarded the Holy Spirit Weekend as an overwhelmingly positive experience. Others shared this view. AL20, for example, said, “I was elated, on cloud nine.” AL5, with slightly more ambivalence, saw some people “bewildered” and “apprehensive” and “in tears” because they “didn’t want anything to happen”, but was confident that “the Holy Spirit never gives you more than you can handle”. He described people speaking of feeling a “tremendous warmth” and “tremendous heat”, while others were “sobbing” or “out in the Spirit”, by which he meant that they would “just fall over”. AL9 was also an enthusiast and spoke of people “saying yes”, and “crying”. It was “very emotional. One of the participants fell over. There were tears.”

The phenomenon of “heat” was a common one:

I did actually experience some sort of a feeling when there was individual one-on-one prayer. I was a little bit taken aback by that because I didn’t expect to feel that. It was almost like some sort of heat went through...... The lady who was doing the prayer and hoping that I would be different..... it was very strange. She put her hand on my back and she was very, very hot, and so there was a lot of heat there, but then I felt it instead of coming through me here, I felt it in my lower legs. I don’t know how that could have..... it might have been a body reaction to heat. (AL15).
AL16 apparently illustrated how a desire for something to be true can overcome our natural scepticism, and how the attitude of those around can influence our judgement. The part played by the pressure of the peer group has been discussed elsewhere (see esp. Chapter Five) and AL16 is a good example here. Speaking of the Holy Spirit Day, initially he had reservations (“I didn’t fancy it at all”), but afterwards:

Wonderful experience. Something happened that day that really does stick in your mind. I think the Holy Spirit definitely descended upon us. A lot of emotion... a journey further into Christianity. I guess I got as close to crying as I get. I found it very emotional. I kept analysing it, wondering if this was just group hysteria brought on by an atmosphere. There were other people going through similar experiences. That was the day we said, ‘Great, come into our lives and make it happen. We’re ready to take you on board’, and pretty much did.

(AL16).

There were others, however, who were less sanguine about the expectations that were created, the effect on vulnerable people, the temptation to ‘one-upmanship’ and the possibility of disappointment and sense of failure:

There were people who were very much wanting things to happen. Others were apprehensive.... I think vulnerable people could come adrift.... It could be a point where, if one didn’t experience things, you might feel you were no good. I think this is the great danger of Alpha. The Christian church is a very broad church and one shouldn’t ever be made to feel one way of doing things is the only way, and I think there is a danger at the Holy Spirit Weekend, especially the videos that are used, that unless you have actually experienced some kind of..... had a sort of road-to-Damascus experience, either you’ve missed out or things are not quite as fulfilled as they could be..... There were no manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

(AL3).

This feeling of people being divided up into first and second class Christians by the Holy Spirit Weekend was echoed by BL8, who was also concerned about what she saw as the Weekend’s bias:

I felt it was heavily loaded in favour of the Charismatic movement. I felt it was not particularly helpful. There was without doubt this emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues, which I felt was the triumph of the congregational church over the community church.... The emphasis was such that you actually went away feeling that in spite of him saying you weren’t second best, you did feel you were second best if you hadn’t actually experienced it.

(BL8).
AL17 was an example of a person whose past emotional experiences had made him vulnerable and susceptible to the pressures placed upon him, such that he lost control:

When you have like a Holy Spirit Day, I always felt a lot of pressure. I remember thinking, ‘Oh crumbs, have I got to start speaking in tongues or something, and falling down - what’s going to happen?’... Incredible emotion. I did a lot of crying. I've been in the parish a long time. Before I moved here my parents were divorced and I was carrying a lot of ‘baggage’... It all came gushing out. We didn’t actually say anything, but I was letting it all go.... My palms were sweating, I was crying, I was hot and cold and hot and cold, I had no control over how I was feeling.... We were a bit out of it.

(AL17).

This susceptibility of people already in an emotionally vulnerable state due to sad events in their lives was often apparent. Another example was BL7:

It was like euphoria, actually... I suddenly felt overwhelmed... very tearful... I was very moved... Whether it was the whole circumstances of where I was, whether it was that they had their hands on me and I was feeling very emotional about that; the fact that they were praying with me, and everything that led up to that, like the break-up of my relationship, all the other events that were quite emotional events any way; and then coming up to that point and then suddenly feeling like.... It was almost like a deep sigh: very odd. I just felt really happy - really elated, but crying at the same time.

(BL7).

BL15 observed this phenomenon in some individuals around her: “Obviously there were one or two people there who were distressed; not necessarily distressed by the experience of being prayed for, but, I assume, because of troubles that they had been through: their own personal circumstances, perhaps bubbling over a bit.”

These kinds of testimony raise a number of issues. The Holy Spirit Day or Weekend, could be seen as having therapeutic value for people who have been through difficult emotional times in their personal lives. Undoubtedly, some find it a source of release for pent up emotions within a compassionate environment, and find comfort and support from those around them. Conversely, it could be seen as the exploitation of emotionally vulnerable people for recruitment purposes. Theologically, it could be questioned whether it is appropriate to attribute the therapeutic benefits which some people find in this comforting environment to the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit. It may be more honest to attribute it simply to the TLC (tender loving care) which is on offer. There is also the ethical issue of the extent to which the support which is given has ‘strings’ attached. To be guaranteed the continued
emotional support of this community one has to accept the theological package which comes with it, namely the teachings of Alpha. Also, if individuals who have been through difficult times or are of a particularly emotional disposition are more likely to exhibit physical evidence of having ‘received’ the Holy Spirit (weeping, falling over etc.) does this mean that people of a particular personality type are more likely to be more authentic (in the view of Alpha) Christians?

BL8 had many positive things to say about Alpha in that she felt it had raised the profile of Christianity and made it attractive, but was concerned about this ‘vulnerability’ issue:

I think for vulnerable people it is always dangerous to be told that there is an answer to their problems. I hope that there is the support for the vulnerable who feel they have found something which is going to change their lives, because it will without doubt, but it needs the support, the infrastructure, and that is perhaps what worries me more than anything. I've seen a lot of damage done to people who think they have found something that is going to make everything all right; and it doesn’t.

(BL8)

BL16 found it hard to distinguish between the action of the Holy Spirit and her own feelings. She described the Holy Spirit Day as a “moving” time, and when asked if she felt that the Holy Spirit had come, replied: “That’s something I'm never really sure about. I find that very hard to decide. Whether it's because I’m wanting to feel something or.....”

A dismissive attitude towards those who were unhappy at what was going on was illustrated by AL18. Commenting on the talk about the Holy Spirit, she said: “There was nothing that would put me off or alarm me in any way, but there were several people who were alarmed and did complain afterwards... I think they don’t want the Holy Spirit in their lives really. They all had little stories of other people who had got involved in something. To me it was very closed-minded.” ‘Lesser’ Christians were “frightened off” by one woman “who went down and stayed in the Spirit for a long time, more or less for the rest of the afternoon”. The pressure to conform and the stigma of not doing so was well illustrated by AL18’s recollection of the minister who was leading the ‘Ministry Time’ advising those present who didn’t want to receive the Holy Spirit to go into the kitchen and have a cup of tea. This pressure was described by BL15: “It had certainly been made clear in advance and on the day as well, that nobody should feel they had to do anything, although when you are there on the day there is a feeling that you should be doing what everybody else is doing. I suppose it would be difficult for someone to stay on their feet and not go forward for prayer.” BL17 described the pressure to produce tears after she had been prayed for: “Yes, I was expected to. I was really determined that there wasn’t going to be.” BL1 had seen similar phenomena in the past at “crusades” and Billy Graham rallies and had always been very moved and very touched, but believed it wasn’t really for her: “On the Awayday when we went into little groups there were people falling and
shaking and I have to turn away from that........ when it becomes so visual and it makes people do things..... that does worry me.... Lots of weeping, lots of falling... it didn’t make me want to go on.” She left the course after the Awayday.

AL4 gave an example of expectations being raised and then disappointed:

In the afternoon there was the Holy Spirit and [name] asking us to stand up and close our eyes and be expectant, which is quite nerve-wracking because we really didn’t know what was happening really. It was a bit strange. He got (in retrospect unwisely) a young girl to give a testimony about something which appeared relevant at the time but in fact stopped them coming. It was too big a step for her. They were a couple that were wanting to join the church but also get married there, and they ended up getting married somewhere else. They didn’t have a good experience of it...... She was standing there with her hands outstretched and eyes shut, waiting; and I and somebody else were praying. The balance wasn’t...... the Holy Spirit wasn’t there really, so it was just an awkward experience..... I certainly went with expectations.

(AL4).

The hope and expectation that ‘something will happen’, the yearning for a definite, visible or audible experience of the Holy Spirit, and the sense of failure when it doesn’t happen were well illustrated by AL12: “One older person that was prayed over - all the way through she kept saying, ‘What have I got to do?’ She made the prayer of commitment and she was prayed over but she still wanted something that was outward and visible that she could say..... and I think that sometimes... I don’t know..... wanting it for the wrong reasons.” AL19 also described the sense of being left out and feeling unworthy experienced by those for whom “nothing happened”:

There was a great build up. We were asked to pray for the Holy Spirit to come. They said you need to do it committedly, not just say a few words. You were sort of ‘waiting’. A strange feeling. You could sense there was a tension in the air. In our group nothing much happened, but in the other group some people had received manifestations of the Holy Spirit, which made it even tougher. You sort of felt unworthy. I went up and they prayed and prayed and nothing happened really for ages and ages. The two helpers on the course said, ‘You’re trying too hard.’ In the other group there were two or three ladies - well [name] was already on the floor, there was another couple of ladies who had just collapsed onto the floor, caught by people. Somebody else was in tears. Somebody else was shaking quite heavily. Someone did feel a lot of pressure on the Holy Spirit Morning.

(AL19).
The rules then are finely balanced. One has to pray "committedly, not just say a few words", but one must not "try too hard". All this activity made some sceptical, as AL19 reported: "Two people shared with me that this feels like a brainwashing session." (For a discussion of brainwashing in relation to Alpha, see Chapters Four and Five). AL21 also felt pressured and became sceptical. He also pinpointed the effect of the isolation factor. Alpha recommends that the Holy Spirit Day be held at a location away from the usual meeting place. AL21 thought that in this respect it operated rather like a sect:

I felt it was manipulative. I dropped out of the last bit. There was this pressure to convert which I believe the course wasn’t really about. At that point I felt it betrayed itself a bit. It was very emotive and that was the atmosphere that had been built up. It smacked a little bit of the sect. I dropped out at that point. I was a bit uncomfortable with it. You’re very isolated. It’s this little spot and it’s very relaxed, a beautiful atmosphere, lovely spot in the country. But then you’re enclosed, you’re away from the rest of the world. There’s no intrusion. The real world doesn’t come into..... I felt it was actually planned that there would be this.... almost like a psychology mapped out as to how this day was going to go. Again, I felt a little bit cynical. There was singing. The collective pressure. There was the peer group pressure. There was talk of people talking in tongues, but nobody did. (AL21).

BL8 was also worried about the isolation: "I’m very sceptical about shutting people up together for a weekend and exposing them to that.” This experience of isolation and the effects that a group can have on an individual are also discussed in Chapter Six.

After the Holy Spirit Day or Weekend, the nature of the Alpha course changes. There is an assumption that one is now committed: "What happens is that people begin to fall over along the way, and by the Holy Spirit Day most people are either in or out” (BL6). Those who were not ‘in’ found a problem continuing with the course:

About two or three people from our course felt that was very much the turning point for them, and three of us didn’t feel it was a turning point. In fact it just made me want to question more and more, particularly about the Trinity.... After the Holy Spirit Day it was assumed that you believed and you were going to carry on. That was a weakness. (BL10).

Clearly the Holy Spirit Day or Weekend is a defining and life-changing moment for those who experience it in its full force. It has a refining power either to bind people into the group or effectively to exclude them from the rest of the course, and therefore, for the devotees of Alpha, from Christianity itself. The descriptions given
above imply that people sense the importance of the experience. Some are desperate to have it because of all they believe it will give them in terms of acceptance. Others sense that after receiving it there is no going back, and are reticent. The loss of control and the apparent handing over of oneself are too big a price to pay. Others appear bewildered or feel that they have missed out in some way. But, as BL10 discovered, continuing with Alpha without accepting the experience is not an option. One suddenly becomes an unwelcome outsider intruding into other people's territory. The 'exploration' is over.

**Does Alpha Offer an Opportunity to Explore the Meaning of Life?**

Given that the whole of the course is advertised as providing an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, each respondent was asked whether they thought the course lived up to that claim. Nineteen (forty-six percent) gave a clear “Yes”, five (twelve percent) a clear “No”, twelve (twenty-nine percent) gave a qualified “Yes”, and five (twelve percent) gave answers which were unclear (see [D.A. FIG 2](#)).

AL3, while responding “yes” to the question, qualified it with the remark that: “Everything we do provides an opportunity to explore the meaning of life”. AL9 responded in the affirmative, but went on to qualify it with: “To be fair, it was really an opportunity to explore Christianity. Because we believe that Christianity is the meaning of life, yes, it’s completely and utterly fulfilled those claims.” This notion of confirming people in their faith, or clarifying their faith was echoed by AL10 who thought it was a fair slogan, although “I don’t know if I would describe it as giving me an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. It certainly gave me an opportunity to explore my own faith and to make a decision as to what that faith was.” Some clearly saw the explanation of Christian faith as being a legitimate interpretation of the exploration of the meaning of life. For these people, the faith clearly came first, and this gave life meaning. For example, AL13 said, “To me life is meaningless without a faith. Therefore, at that level, yes it does explore the meaning of life.” AL11 put it another way: “If you buy into Christianity then that is an explanation of the
meaning of life.” AL13 did admit, however, that as a result of the “catchphrase”, “people might think they’re going to get something different”, and AL21 saw that this ‘Christian context’ interpretation would be of no help in appealing to those outside the church, which is Alpha’s aim. When asked the question, he replied:

Yes, but only within the Christian framework. I remember talking to people at work about it because there had been the poster campaign. They didn’t know what it was about really. They had seen the posters, they were aware of them, they were surprised that I was going on it, but the impression among non-churchgoers was, ‘Oh, that’s just a church thing isn’t it?’ We got a lot from it but where do you ever go to get the man on the street to go to a course like that? Certainly here it didn’t work. It may well work elsewhere. I don’t know anyone else who went.

(AL21).

It seems that, in this case at least, despite the poster’s universal claim (‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’) it was easily perceived as “just a church thing”. AL22 also saw Alpha as “more explaining Christianity than exploring the meaning of life”.

Other qualified responses were, for example, “Up to a point”, “In a roundabout way”, and “In one sense yes, in another sense no”. The latter respondent (BL4) went on to expand on the contrast between the internal Christian interpretation of that phrase (“an opportunity to explore the meaning of life”) which some wish to maintain, and a more universal interpretation:

The Alpha course is coming from the viewpoint that the meaning of life is only to be found and fulfilled in a relationship with Christ, and from that point of view I think it does provide to some extent the answer to that question. However, another way of looking at that question is a much more philosophical way, which would be a much broader, exploratory sort of thing, perhaps starting with the question and then working out from that. In that sense, no. The Alpha course comes with answers and it leads you down a path like a train travelling down a track. It does provide an opportunity for people to ask questions.

(BL4).

BL15 also made that distinction: “Within a Christian context, yes. It is a specifically Christian course. But if you were looking at it on a secular philosophical level, then it’s only one way of looking at that.” Here, ‘a Christian course’ clearly means a course which presents Christianity and nothing else. It could be that this respondent also gave a clue as to why so many who replied saw Alpha as both a presentation of Christianity and as an exploration of the meaning of life, with no contradiction: “Because I’ve been a Christian for a long time, you just get used to that way of thinking, but if someone wanted to look at it as an objective question, I would
imagine they could criticize it." This may illustrate how difficult some committed Christians apparently find it to put themselves in the shoes of those who do not share their presuppositions, and hence find it difficult to engage in meaningful discussion of these ultimate questions with those from right outside the church. What seems to them, from within their faith perspective, to be a legitimate interpretation of the claim, ‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’, assumes too much for those outside. They may believe they are offering those outside the church such an opportunity, but what those outside may actually see is “just a church thing” (AL21).

**What Sort of People Do You Think Alpha Works Best With?**

The respondents were then asked what sort of people they felt *Alpha* works best with, and what sort of people they felt it was unlikely to work with. These questions were designed to test the reach of the course in the views of those who participated in it and therefore have some first-hand experience. The respondents were left to interpret the phrase “sort of people” in whatever way they saw fit. In fact, broadly speaking they interpreted it principally in two ways. The first was in terms of the degree of prior Christian knowledge they felt was called for to benefit from the course. Views on this varied widely between those who felt prior knowledge was required to understand the use made of the bible and the terminology, and those who felt that prior knowledge might be a positive disadvantage because it was better to come with unformed views. The second interpretation was in terms of cultural background. There were some who thought the course would appeal primarily to those who resembled Nicky Gumbel and the video audience he was addressing, i.e. overwhelmingly white, young, well-educated and middle-class (described by AL12 as “yuppie world”), and those who believed it could appeal to anyone. The responses have been further broken into the following five categories:

(i) **Those with questions**

AL1 thought those who came with a genuine need or with genuine questions would be touched by it, but anyone who was “not actually seriously looking for a deeper understanding of what life’s all about is going to look at it in a superficial way.” BL2 thought it would appeal to “anyone who has got a slight question”, but not “the die-hards who aren’t going to take any notice”. AL11 added: “disruptive people who were going for the wrong reasons”. BL7 thought it would work best with “those who are striving to look for something that’s missing in their lives”, but would not satisfy “those with deep and complex questions.” AL7 thought it would work best for “people with questions they want answered - people who are really searching. I have friends who would like to drift back but haven’t done so. I think those are the people it would help”. The fact that AL7 refers to people “drifting back”, however, implies that these are not people who are new to the church. Despite this, AL7 felt it would help those with no church background at all.

(ii) **Those with some Church background**

AL10 and AL11 again pinpointed how difficult it is for long-term Christians brought up in the faith and familiar with bible-stories since childhood to make judgements about how much prior knowledge would be needed to benefit from *Alpha*: “It’s
difficult to say really, because having had the upbringing where we’ve both been to Sunday School and had a religious background, then....” (AL10); “There’s a lot we take for granted, like certainly understanding at least the summary story behind Jesus and some of the Old Testament things as well. I would say, if you know nothing about it you might find some terminology confusing” (AL11). AL16 thought Alpha worked best for “people with some exposure to church”, and was unlikely to work with people “who firmly believe there is no God. I don’t know if it would necessarily convert anyone who hadn’t got a belief to start one, to have a grounding”. AL22 thought that to be of use to people with no Christian background at all, “you’d have to go into a lot more detail with the fundamental, basic stuff, because I think it was an assumption that you had some idea”. BL6 also thought the course made some basic assumptions, “that most people understand the Christian ethic as expressed in the ten commandments and in England in everyday life”. BL11 also thought “you’ve got to have something there - a slight belief”. AL4 thought Alpha worked best for people who were “not necessarily Christians, but people who maybe just live a Christian life”, and it was probably better if people came without preconceptions that they may have from childhood. BL12 thought it was most suited to “people who are already Christians and have never gone beyond going to church”. AL21 thought “it probably works best with people who have got some belief, aren’t sure where it’s come from, and are looking to clarify it and strengthen it.”

(iii) The unchurched
BL8 thought Alpha worked best with the unchurched and that it was probably better if they had no prior Christian knowledge. She thought it was less likely to work with “the cradle Christians who have been plodding away at the coal-face all their lives”. This was because “I think it has the power to persuade rather than the power to touch, and I think people with entrenched views only change if they are touched, and I don’t think it has that power”. BL14 agreed and went further: “Perhaps the less you know the better.” BL13 shared the view that it was unlikely to have much impact on people with formed opinions, and indeed thought that Alpha made little attempt to engage with such people: “It may be intended to be addressed to them, but since no trouble has been taken to find out why their opinions are as they are, or whether they have them at all, it’s very difficult to answer their problems.” He thought it might appeal to teenagers “without any regular religious doctrine, who do their own wondering about religion and are looking for something to associate with - believe in”. For him, the main attraction was the fellowship. AL21 thought that the singing and the music would be “intimidating and threatening” to anyone who had no background, while AL2 was clear that “it won’t work for people who have got a closed mind” since “the whole purpose of it is for you to examine yourself as well as to take in facts.” However, she believed that: “It benefits everybody, of that there is no doubt. I can’t think of a category of person it wouldn’t benefit.” BL5 also thought there was no particular group with whom it would not work, as did BL9. BL10 thought Alpha worked best with people who were prepared to talk to each other openly in a group and who were prepared to ask questions. It was less effective with aggressive people who just talked about their own experiences all the time and didn’t give anybody else the opportunity to speak.
(iv) Particular cultural types

AL3 identified the cultural problem: “As to who it would work best with, I have to say it’s probably the type of people that he was speaking to, which was the younger, fairly articulate element of the age-range. I just feel that his talk of Oxford University and the squash club in Fulham... Is that really going to ring bells with high-rise, inner city...?”. AL5 agreed that this would be true if you used the Nicky Gumbel video, “but if you do it in the inner city and your vicar adapted it, you would reach people just the same”. BL14 also regarded it as important to adapt the course to the predominant culture and believed it could thereby have universal appeal. AL19 portrayed the problem quite vividly: “I think you have to like the speaker on the video. It’s his language, his culture, his background. He was a lawyer, he does play squash, he probably did have a fast car, he did go to university. If it’s that sort of cultural setting that you come from, then it goes down very well. If you’re a Northerner in a coal mine and you’re a rugby league player, culturally you’d probably be out of synch with what is essentially a ‘middle England’ type approach.” BL4 thought it was geared to people who are better educated. He described Alpha as very “wordy” and noticed that: “We did have some more people on the course who were more working class and I think they found it more difficult to relate to.” He also described it as “churchy” and that if you had no basic knowledge of Christianity, “it could be a bit confusing”. AL14 added that to work at its best “you need similar types of people together”. She felt slightly at odds with the group she found herself placed in: “I think they all knew each other because they were all at the church. It worked well for them because they were able to take the discussions as far as they wanted to go and in the direction they wanted them to go. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the direction for me.” She thought it was too “religious” and “didn’t want to feel embarrassed about suddenly asking a question and then being made to look silly because ‘If you’re C of E you really ought to know that’, and I don’t!” On a slightly different tack, BL18 thought it was less likely to work with ethnic minorities, and BL19 thought it might be very uncomfortable for gay people or unmarried couples living together because of the moral line taken at certain points in the course or arising in the groups.

AL4 identified Nicky Gumbel (giving the talks) as a possible problem: “I would say about the video that if Nicky Gumbel annoys you then that’s a bit of a no-no! That has been said to me.” AL13 identified a particular problem here: “I have heard it said that because he is always looking so lovingly at his wife and she gazes back in the same way, it could just be that tension for people who don’t have that wonderful relationship.”

(v) Those of a certain age

AL15 identified age as a factor. Contrary to the claims of Holy Trinity Brompton (“20s and 30s Attending Alpha in Thousands” - headline, Alpha News, March 2002 - June 2002), AL15 saw the majority of Alpha attenders as being middle-aged or older. “Probably the reason is once people retire they think: ‘What next?’ And then they have more time to think about what’s happening to them... People in their twenties and early thirties are settling into their lives and very busy and haven’t got a lot of time to think about anything more than the daily schedule.” AL18 thought it ought to
appeal to younger people because “younger people are open to new ideas” and “as
you get older most people get rather set in their ideas.” However, her actual
experience of Alpha was the opposite: “On the Alpha course last year there was a
predominance of older people.”

A future area of research might focus on the issue of age. Holy Trinity Brompton is
keen to emphasise Alpha’s appeal to people in their twenties and thirties who make
up much of HTB’s congregation. A key question could be: ‘Does Alpha simply reflect
the ages of the people who make up the church which is running it, or does Alpha
actually have an influence on the age of the church’s congregation?’ This, and
cultural background are identified in Chapter Ten as possible areas for future
research. For the purposes of the present research however, the focus is primarily on
the subject matter and methods rather than the profile of those involved in Alpha.

Strengths and weaknesses? Overall impression? Other comments?

Finally, the respondents were asked three more generalised questions, namely what
they felt the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha were, what their overall impression
was, and whether they had any other comments to make.

On the subject of strengths and weaknesses, the strengths identified can be classified
under seven headings which, in order of descending popularity, are: Attractive
Format, Warmth, Teaching Content, Saleability, Openness, Lack of Pressure, and
Other. The weaknesses can similarly be classified under six headings: Limited
Appeal, Holy Spirit Day / Weekend, Leadership, Rigidity, Format and Other.

Twenty-six comments may be classified under Attractive Format, of which the most
commonly identified strength was the meal. Nine of the forty-one interviewed
mentioned it. Five identified the ‘structure’, three the video, and two the ‘format’.
Others identified the ‘presentation’, thought it was “not too complicated” and “easy
to organise” such that “anyone could give it”. It provided “lots of materials” of “good
quality” and “made Christianity attractive”.

Under the heading Warmth, four spoke of “fellowship”, three of “getting together”,
and two of a sense of “belonging”. Two enjoyed the “group environment” and two
appreciated the opportunity to “meet new people”. Others identified “friendship”, the
“closeness of the group”, and the fact that the groups were “small” and “supportive”.
Others were glad to be with “like-minded people” and found them “kind and
open-hearted”.

The heading Teaching Content embraces a number of individual comments. The
teaching “made you think”, “educated you” and gave a “historic overview” in the
view of one, and resembled a “Sunday School for adults” to another. Another
respondent thought it provided “good reinforcement”, while another thought it
“assumed no prior knowledge”. Someone else thought it “dealt with all the issues
people are likely to raise”, while another identified a clear “purpose to each session”.


Under the heading *Saleability*, three saw *Alpha* as a well-known commodity which had “good publicity” including the “posters”. This made it “easy to sell” along with the fact that it was now in “different languages”.

Six people appreciated the *Openness*, which meant “you can ask questions” or indeed “ask anything”. There was an “opportunity to discuss”, to “talk about God” and to “have your questions answered”.

Two people identified the *Lack of Pressure*, and under *Other*, one thought that “everybody benefits” and another was pleased about the “reliance on the Holy Spirit”.

With regard to weaknesses, *Alpha’s Limited Appeal* was the main concern and was identified by eighteen respondents. Two used that phrase, two thought there were “too many Christians on the course” and two thought that the agreement between participants meant it was “sometimes difficult to get conversations going”. Others thought it was “aimed at the church”, “more for the churched than the unchurched”, or that it “didn’t reach those outside the church.” Other criticisms were that *Alpha* “assumes belief in God”, “only appeals to like-minded people” and uses “too much religious language” (eg ‘glory’). Other reasons given for its limited appeal were that it “doesn’t go back to basics enough” and that it “passes over pre-Christian stuff too soon”. Others identified “cultural limitations”, thought it was “too intellectual for some”, just “not everybody’s thing” or, more personally, that “it didn’t work for me”.

Thirteen were worried about the *Holy Spirit Day / Weekend*. Two thought it was “manipulative”, two thought that it might have a bad effect on “vulnerable people” and two thought it assumed commitment too soon. Others thought that it simply came “too soon” in the course, was “divisive”, “put people off” or “could get out of control”. Another was worried that “people may feel they’re not a proper Christian if they don’t have these experiences”, another that it “went too far” and someone else found it “frightening”.

Seven had problems which can be grouped under the heading *Leadership*. Five of these revolved around Nicky Gumbel himself. Two of them simply didn’t like his style, one thought the course was “too dependent” on him, one saw a danger of “Gumbel-worship” and one was worried about the power such a charismatic individual could have. Two others saw the course as being too dependent on the calibre of whoever happened to be running it locally.

Under the heading of *Rigidity*, one saw the course as “too prescriptive”, another as “too rigid”, while another saw the necessity “to make it clear it’s not the only viewpoint.” Someone else thought that if you missed two weeks it was difficult to catch up because things had moved on.

Interestingly, the *Format* was seen as a weakness as well as a strength, although not by many. One thought that the groups needed to be smaller, another that the videos were too long, and another that there was simply too much to cram into an evening.
Other weaknesses identified were the fact that the course does not cover suffering, that it can be pushed too much and that there is no follow-on course.

In summary there were seventy identifications of strengths, against forty-nine identifications of weakness. No clear conclusions can be drawn from this, due to the limited scope. However, given that nearly all of those interviewed were already existing churchgoers (see above) and might be expected to be sympathetic to the course, there were a large number of concerns expressed about the course, most notably its limited appeal to those outside the church, and those relating to the Holy Spirit Weekend.

Asked for their overall impressions of Alpha, the respondents most commonly described it as “good” or “very good”, or “enjoyable”. It was also seen as a “useful tool”, as being “helpful”, “inspirational”, or even “brilliant”. Others described it as “accessible”, “a good starter” and saw it as “very positive”, “interesting”, “enlightening”, “well run” and “fun”. It was also “thought-provoking”, “well-presented”, “encouraging”, “well worth doing”, and “made Christianity acceptable”. Others thought it had “brought Christianity out of the church” and “made it acceptable” so that “it reaches out to so many people who didn’t know what they were missing”. It was “pitched at the right level”, “the best thing since sliced bread”, “will bring people to Christ” and included “something for everyone”. It was also “a great way to have all your questions answered”, a “good way of introducing the Christian faith to a mass majority of people”, and “a wonderful way to get to know God”. Several said they would recommend it.

Some expressed reservations: “It could become a badge”, “The person who leads it is the key”. One respondent thought it was “not great, because I didn’t get out of it what I wanted to”, while another “would like to go on one that describes every faith” and thought “you do need some church background to do it”. Another thought it was “too Christian” and another “too overtly out to convert”. One commented: “We didn’t think it was the thing for our parish because our parish consists of people who are already there or who are so far off that Alpha wouldn’t have any effect.” On the whole, however, the comments were overwhelmingly favourable. Clearly, most of those within these two deaneries who had completed an Alpha course found the experience largely positive, enjoyable and helpful. However, the overwhelming majority were already committed churchgoers and enthusiasts for the course. Many were realistic about its limited appeal to those outside the church, and those who did make wider claims for Alpha appeared to do so more out of hope than experience.

Finally, each respondent was asked if they had any other comments to make with regard to Alpha. The responses given appear to indicate a much more ambivalent view. Some did give wholly positive responses. For two respondents, Alpha had a clearly therapeutic value: “If you’d had a stressful day and then went along to Alpha, you felt quite relaxed. It puts everything into perspective really.” “It helps you handle stress. It helped our relationship. It helps you make an effort to help people.” Another was evidently looking to join a church, and Alpha provided the opportunity: “I wanted to be part of the church. I needed a grounding. I was looking for a way in. I was
baptised and confirmed the other day as a result of Alpha.” Another saw Alpha as a means of improving the faith of existing Christians: “There must be millions of Christians out there who haven’t got it all clearly yet. They think they have, but they haven’t.” For another, Alpha meant a change from a religion of the head to a religion of the heart: “My heart believes now, whereas it didn’t before.” One respondent said that it helped her to understand the bible, while another wanted to emphasise the centrality of the Holy Spirit and that “the real magic happens in the relationships”. Another spoke of having her faith strengthened: “I wanted to feel that I could believe again, that it wasn’t just me inventing it. It’s left me a lot more confident in my belief. I wasn’t a new convert or anything.” All of these (except the one who was confirmed) were already regular churchgoers, and the one exception was an ‘occasional’ churchgoer. Again, it was clearly an enjoyable and beneficial experience for many existing churchgoers.

One non-churchgoer, the sort of person at whom Alpha is targeted, felt she “wasn’t helped” by Alpha. She wanted to discuss issues such as the six referred to earlier “without it getting too religious. All the people in my group were very much religious, knew what they felt and thought - knew in their mind what they thought the correct answer was.” A respondent who was a churchgoer said that it wasn’t what she expected. She was hoping to have a “religious education”. Another, who himself enjoyed the course, nevertheless was concerned about its limited appeal to those outside the church. Another respondent, who was disappointed at the lack of intellectual rigour of the course, attended about half the sessions, even after he had “given up hope”. He “wanted to know whether an honest attempt was going to be put forward to talk sense.” His impression was that “it may well have been an honest attempt but it wasn’t at all successful.”

Some had more ambivalent views. One respondent “went into it wanting to know what God wants me to do - don’t know whether it answered it - and wanting to belong.” Another felt largely but not completely satisfied: “I went in with lots of questions (existence of God, truth of the bible, Holy Spirit, suffering, some which are too complicated) and felt that seventy to eighty percent were answered.” Another was aware of the scepticism of many outside the church: “You’ve got to go in with an open mind. If you have predetermined views you’ll come out still convinced it’s a load of rubbish.” But another was optimistic about Alpha’s reach to those on the edge of church life: “Possibly there’s a lot of preaching to the converted, but it has drawn a lot from the fringes.” Another respondent was not convinced by the teaching approach: “Religion is not about intellectual discussion. It is inside your heart and you have to feel it and believe it. Personal experiences - those are the things that remain with you.” Another thought it was a good course despite noticing that “one lady actually left”. One other saw potential for the course but was concerned about its possible effects on the vulnerable non-churchgoer: “I think it would work for someone with no church background, but if one assumes that it was initiated with the idea of reaching out to people who had either lapsed faith or a pamphlet through the door and reaching out into the community, I think it probably would, but I think it needs enormous care - and this is the bit that worries me about the Holy Spirit. You may be reaching out to very vulnerable people. If you’re coming from a non-church
background, where do you take your concerns?” Those with ambivalent views about Alpha were on the whole sympathetic and enjoyed the experience, but were concerned about the extent or nature of its impact on those outside the church.

From the responses of those interviewed, then, it is evident that both they and those they observed in their groups were overwhelmingly existing church members, even those who dropped out, rather than Alpha’s target group of those outside the church. On the whole they enjoyed the experience of both the talks and the groups, though the talks appeared to be largely ‘preaching to the converted’ and the groups tended to be social in nature when they were made up entirely of churchgoers, and rather intimidating if there was anyone else present. The bigger questions evident on the questionnaires and which some interviewees would like to have had addressed (in particular ‘suffering’) were quite often raised, but not really examined, apparently because the groups were not inclined or equipped to do so.

It was borne out by the interviews that the Holy Spirit Weekend (or more often ‘Day’) was both the most powerful and the most controversial part of the course. Often it was left out, but when it remained in its full-blown form it clearly had a profound and often decisive effect on the subjects. As discussed above, from this point on one was either committed to Alpha or one was not. The time for exploration was over. The psychological pressure on individuals in those courses where emphasis was placed on this direct experience of the Holy Spirit (as it should be, according to HTB’s guidance - see esp. Chapter Five) some clearly found disturbing.

Many interviewees did think that Alpha’s claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life was fair, though this only applied if one started from a particular Christian premise. If one’s Christian faith had given one’s life meaning, then Alpha did indeed offer the opportunity to explore that faith further, but only within the confines of that particular understanding of Christianity. For the non-believer, or indeed for those whose Christian faith takes a different form, it cannot offer such an exploration, because it assumes too much. Hence, it could be argued that to advertise the course within the confines of the church, where it would reach primarily church people might be seen as legitimate. But to advertise it on public billboards or on leaflets pushed through random letterboxes, making that claim, and thus implying an open-ended educational experience, could be regarded as somewhat misleading. However, as was observed, people outside the church are in fact quick to identify it as ‘a church thing’ and therefore not for them. It may also be indicative of how easily, in their excitement at something new, those inside the church forget how marginal and irrelevant their activities appear to those who are not churchgoers.

Opinions varied amongst interviewees concerning how much prior knowledge people thought was necessary to benefit from Alpha. On the one hand it was felt that some prior knowledge of the basics of the bible and of the kind of language that Christians use in the church is necessary to understand Alpha; but on the other, some felt it was better if people came with no preconceived ideas. In fact, of course, the Alpha participants were overwhelmingly of the former kind. Many did also identify the cultural difficulty, pointing to Nicky Gumbel’s own social background which came
through in his illustrations in the talks. It is simply unrealistic to expect an equally articulate speaker to ‘translate’ the talks, with appropriate illustrations from working class culture, as Gumbel suggests (see also Chapter Nine).

Given the churchgoing nature of the course participants, they were unsurprisingly complimentary about the course inasmuch as they enjoyed being on it, but they were aware particularly of its limited appeal to those outside the church. As such then, from the limited evidence of these interviews, Alpha appears to fall short both of its publicly stated educational claim and in its covert evangelical aim.

(iv) The Senior Clergy

An archdeacon and a bishop were interviewed separately in their own homes, and each interview lasted for approximately an hour.

Each of them had jurisdiction over an area embracing the two deaneries referred to earlier, but with different kinds of responsibilities. To put it simply, a bishop has pastoral oversight in his area and an archdeacon deals primarily with practical and legal matters. In practice however, there is always overlap between the two roles.

Both were asked what experience they had of Alpha, what their thoughts and reflections were about it, how effective they considered it to be, whether or not they thought it addressed the questions that people are actually asking, how they would account for its numerical success, whether or not they thought it lived up to its claim to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, what sort of topics they would include in a course making such a claim, what they saw as the best way to evangelise, whether or not they saw any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education, how important they thought numerical growth was in the life of the church, and finally whether they had any other comments they would like to make.

The archdeacon had previous experience of Alpha as a parish priest in a large conservative Evangelical church. Like many other clergy he “toned down the Charismatic element”, and noticed that after the Holy Spirit Weekend people talked about “having asked the Holy Spirit into their life”, but with no mention of Christ. He was concerned about the ‘recycling’ function, i.e. that those doing Alpha were actually existing churchgoers: “I think there’s quite a lot of double counting. Recycling. Many of the Alpha courses have a very high proportion of committed church members going through them.” He also noted the status issue of ‘being Alpha’ or ‘not being Alpha’. Pete Ward made the same point (see below) about the importance for many churches of getting their name on the list of those running courses published in Alpha News. Alpha appears to be the defining criterion for a ‘successful’ church, at least amongst Evangelical churches, and increasingly amongst others as well. The Archdeacon thought Alpha exhibited some cult-like characteristics and didn’t always help people to “grow”. It was too “directive”, too ready to provide answers. He was worried that what purported to be an evangelistic tool was actually a “Charismatic agenda” tool, so that people were being inducted into one particular
form of Christianity without it being explicitly stated. He was also concerned about the degree of control over how that tool was used. He was sure that many clergy made changes to it, thus infringing the copyright, but didn’t “put their hand up”. This impression would certainly be borne out by many of my interviews with clergy. The archdeacon had in fact written to Sandy Millar (the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton) saying that he “would like to make some adjustments to the Weekend to make it more Christ-centred and less Holy Spirit centred in the teaching content.” He received a reply from HTB telling him this alternative was not allowed, so he dropped Alpha.

The bishop had helped in a parish running Alpha and had been involved in an Alpha re-launch. He said he had confirmed (an adult formal and public act of commitment) many people who had come to faith through Alpha, and had experience of running it in prison. His impression, like that of many clergy who are enthusiasts, was that Alpha was bringing new people to faith, as indicated by these confirmations, though without interviewing those individuals concerned it is difficult to know precisely what their condition was before. The archdeacon certainly did not feel that Alpha led to a noticeable rise in the number of adult confirmation candidates “though there was much talking about ‘success’”. The archdeacon disliked the triumphalist tone of Alpha News and Alpha’s tendency to describe itself as “the way”.

The bishop also had reservations and had come across parishes which were unhappy with it for a whole variety of reasons, including “burn out” and “exhaustion” after running it three or four times. As discussed earlier (see Chapter Five), according to Nicky Gumbel the course “needs to be run at least three times a year”, “you need to do it at least nine times to get the feel of it” and it takes “four or five years to break through into the community”. The bishop thought it was a pity that Alpha could not acknowledge that there are issues on which Christians are not totally united. He had problems with the theological line being taken, and in particular the “substitutionary theories of atonement” being propounded. He was also concerned that a course dealing with Christian basics should have so little about ecclesiology (theology of the church) and sacramental theology (concerning primarily baptism and the eucharist). These slightly differing concerns may reflect the ecclesiological backgrounds of the archdeacon (Evangelical) and bishop (catholic).

The bishop, like the Alpha graduates, saw the main strength of Alpha as being “the meal, because it shows that Christianity is actually about relationships, it’s not actually about knowledge”. He thought that Nicky Gumbel had “a good communication style” and thought that “people had the opportunity to share their own life’s experiences”. This latter point is borne out in some cases amongst those interviewed, and reflects the therapeutic function of Alpha amongst those who need a forum in which to share their problems.

The bishop and archdeacon differed in their assessment of how effective they thought Alpha had been. The archdeacon, conscious of the closed-endedness of the course thought that it could “almost inoculate them against an openness to a good process of formation thereafter”. Clearly, for him Alpha did not provide either good evangelism (because it was not actually drawing in many new people) nor good education.
(because of its lack of openness). He thought it was “overrated and certainly over-promoted”. By contrast, the bishop was “surprised at just how many people have been drawn into it”, but again, this was an impressionistic evaluation rather than based on conversations with the individuals concerned. The bishop thought that it was numerically successful because of the marketing and because “it enabled lay people to feel they can be missionaries”. Perhaps this latter observation is similar to the claim that “anyone can do it” made by some of the Alpha graduates.

When asked if they thought Alpha addressed ordinary people’s questions, the bishop thought it did indeed try to address “some of the harder questions”, but the archdeacon thought that this may be the case only for “certain sorts of people”. He explained: “We are a very segmented society now. You often don’t get very coherent questions... suffering and death. People need relationship.” Again, this latter observation seems to bear out the responses given by the Alpha graduates. When asked whether they thought that Alpha did provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, the bishop thought that it did provide an opportunity to begin to do that, but the archdeacon was less convinced: “No. I don’t think there’s overmuch help with people really trying to explore. It certainly produces answers to questions that it thinks people ought to be asking. It gives you packaged answers.”

There was much more agreement when the archdeacon and bishop were asked about the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith. They both thought that it wasn’t so much about a course of topics, but rather about relationships. The archdeacon also stressed how important it was to start with listening to the questions people actually ask. Significantly, this issue has been at the heart of the present research, and links evangelism with learning. Clearly both the archdeacon and the bishop believed that the church should be concerned with both learning and evangelism, and that the two were not to be separated. The archdeacon did not believe that Alpha was up to the job. When asked whether he saw any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education and, if so, which the church should be involved in, he replied: “There is a place for both”. For him, the problem with Alpha was that it didn’t really deal with people’s questions but just told them what it (Alpha) wanted them to hear, and, “What worries me is trying to tie the whole thing up much too tidily”. The bishop thought it would be better for the church to face the big religious (or ultimate) questions head on (questions such as those raised on the original questionnaires - see Chapter Seven) but he could understand why Alpha didn’t do that. As he saw it, Alpha intended to give people a certain amount of the Christian faith which would then supply the tools with which to address those questions.

However, while Christian evangelists may see this as a legitimate way to proceed, it means that there can never be a real dialogue concerning these ultimate questions between those inside the church and those outside. It also means that the claim of the public posters to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life is omitting the vital piece of information which people will only discover if and when they turn up, namely that conversion is required first before that exploration can take place. It was this that was criticised by the individuals from the adult education centre who had not
completed an Alpha course (see above), by the individual who went along but quickly dropped out (see above) and may well be the suspicion of those outside the church who perceive it as a ‘church thing’ and therefore are unlikely to attend.

This perception of the limited appeal of any course which a church offers may be widespread. It may be that in reality faith tends to come first, and courses come afterwards. This appears to be true of Alpha just as much as any other course a church might put on. It will tend to attract the already committed. This anecdotally appears to be the case even when the course being put on is purely educational and authorised by a secular organisation. In my years as an RE teacher in a county (i.e., non-church) school, the ‘O’ and ‘A’ level candidates tended on the whole to have strong church backgrounds, even though the courses did not require it and the RE staff were at pains to emphasise that such a commitment was not necessary. The same outcome held good in the Religious Studies course at the college (non-church) where I underwent my initial teacher-training, and in the university theology faculty where I first undertook postgraduate work. Interestingly, when the present research was presented to a seminar made up of PhD students and staff in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey, the overwhelming majority of students who (voluntarily) came along to participate had come across Alpha before, and it became evident in the course of discussion that they knew of it through contact with churches. The anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that religious research and religious courses, no matter how they are dressed up, nor no matter how secular the context, are of interest overwhelmingly only to religious people. Hence, even Alpha, despite its posters and publicity appears still to be perceived as ‘a church thing’ and therefore of little interest to the wider public. Churches should perhaps therefore recognise that the courses they run may be in practice for the already committed, and find other means for their evangelistic task.

(v) The Academic

Pete Ward, a lecturer at King’s College London, and formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Youth Officer, was interviewed on the fifth of February 2001. Ward wrote an article criticising Alpha (Ward, 1998), reviewed earlier in this thesis (see Chapter Six).

He was asked what experience he had of Alpha, whether he thought it offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, whether Alpha did present, as Gumbel claims, the basics upon which Christians are all agreed, what he thought its purpose was, how effective he thought it was, whether it addressed the questions ordinary people are asking, how he accounted for its apparent numerical success, what he made of the Holy Spirit Weekend, what sort of responses he got to his article, whether he thought Alpha was ‘God’s work’, what topics he would choose if he were creating a course with Alpha’s aims, how he thought evangelism worked best, whether he thought the church should be involved in adult religious education or adult Christian education, and how important he thought numerical growth was for the church.
Ward had studied the Alpha materials, though he had not been involved in a course himself. He thought that the claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life was a fair claim, "if you buy that Jesus is the meaning of life". This reflects the view of the bishop and some interviewees quoted earlier that faith has to provide the tools or the context in which the exploration must take place if any progress is to be made. The evangelistic intention of Alpha ensures that it is specifically Christian faith rather than any other that is required. Ward considered that the notion that Alpha's basics are those agreed upon by all Christians was "complete nonsense" and he specifically indicated the teaching on the Holy Spirit, which everyone "customises".

Ward distinguished between the purpose of Alpha (evangelism) and its function, which is more complex: "For a church it is a badge of liveliness and identity. It has managed to create a means whereby significant numbers of people can be engaged in mission. It’s having a significant impact on local churches. It’s an obvious shop-window." Ward is convinced of Alpha's effectiveness ("If you’ve got a group of ten people, of whom eight are Christians...... if you’ve got two who are just looking...... how many of our services have even that?") though his assessment is impressionistic. He is, for example, prepared to take at face value the testimonies published in Alpha News: "In Alpha News every week there are piles of stories of people whose lives have been changed through Alpha". (See Chapter Four for my critique of these testimonies).

Ward combines an acceptance of Alpha's success with a slightly cynical regard for what is actually being achieved. He believes it is managing to get people to talk about God in a way that other parts of the church have failed to do, and in an age where people want quick and easy answers in religion as in everything else, Alpha can meet the demand:

There are large areas of life that are left out by Alpha. On the other hand it is talking about God and the Christian faith. It manages to produce a shop-window for Christianity. They’re in play. Other than George Carey and Cliff there is nothing. Contemporary people don’t want to ask questions. The evidence is that people are much keener that you’re really clear about what you think everything’s about and you just tell them, so they can just say yes.

He also sees people's need for an experiential encounter with God as being met by the Holy Spirit Weekend.

Ward said he had received quite a lot of response to his article from people who were glad that he had stuck his neck out a bit. Indeed, some wished he had gone further in his criticisms. Holy Trinity Brompton, however, went into "serious anti-spin mode". Precisely what form this took (other than correspondence in the Church Times) Ward did not say, but he had clearly been profoundly influenced by it. It was a source of frustration for him that his scholarly article, written by him as an academic, was not responded to in like fashion, but rather interpreted as the writings of a
representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury criticising a major Church of England success story.

When asked about his choice of topics for a course in Christian basics, Ward said that he wouldn’t have it substantially different from *Alpha*, and when asked how he thought evangelism worked best, he echoed the sentiments of many others in speaking of relationships. He also believed that the church should put itself ‘out there’, for example providing a ‘worship event’ where people can meet God.

When asked about adult religious education and adult Christian education, Ward saw the dilemma between wanting to be open and not didactic (or “imperialistic”) but at the same time wanting to evangelise, which to Ward entails bringing people to a commitment. Ward is for keeping it simple: “Somehow what is needed is a commitment to Christian faith which avoids imperialistic frameworks but doesn’t deny a commitment. In a lot of ways people are rather clueless about where you start with these things. It’s a lot easier to start where he [Jesus] is. Why muck about?”

Finally Ward was asked whether, given *Alpha*’s emphasis on numbers (of people, of courses, and of churches running *Alpha*), he thought numbers of people were important in the life of the church. His response was affirmative: “Numbers are made up of ones. If we talk about one person coming to faith, then that’s one person whom God rejoices over. The church could disappear from the UK. Numbers are serious, I think.”

Ward’s tone throughout the interview was much more conciliatory towards *Alpha* than was the tone of his article. He had evidently been affected by the responses to it, particularly by those from within the Evangelical constituency of which Ward himself is a part, and this had to some extent blunted his critical edge. There was a real conflict between Ward the scholar and Ward the Evangelical Christian. In this sense it could be said that Ward embodied the difficulty, particularly for Evangelical Christians, of reconciling education and evangelism, especially when education entails a critical assessment of Evangelical religious belief and practice.

(vi) The Founder

The Reverend Nicky Gumbel, Curate at Holy Trinity Brompton and the founder of *Alpha* in its modern form, was interviewed at HTB on 14th March 2001.

When asked about his own religious upbringing, Gumbel explained that his father was a German Jew and his mother a “non-churchgoing Anglican”, so that he was brought up, as he sees it, without a faith. This later enabled him to understand “the difference between having a faith and not having a faith”, and motivated him to communicate that faith to people who, like himself, were not brought up with a Christian faith. He was clear that *Alpha* was aimed at precisely these people.

When asked about the origins of the *Alpha* course, Gumbel explained that he inherited the course from his predecessor at HTB, though in those days the discussion
groups were largely bible studies and the course was designed for existing Christians. He changed the course so that, as he saw it, it was aimed more at those who were not Christians. This entailed changing the order of the talks and altering their content “to argue the point” because belief could no longer be assumed. The group sessions were changed from bible studies to discussions of issues like “suffering or other religions or whatever.” Gumbel believes that “each talk now is aimed at people outside the church”.

Gumbel’s book, Searching Issues (Gumbel, 1994b), attempts to answer the questions which Gumbel says most frequently arise in the discussion groups (Suffering, Other Religions, Sex Before Marriage, The New Age, Homosexuality, Science and Christianity, The Trinity) but when asked whether he had any plans to integrate these issues into the talks, he replied that he did not. He said that this would be a “defensive shot” and could risk putting objections to Christianity into people’s minds where none existed. His clear purpose in the talks was to “take people forward” and to “present the positive case”. He saw this as being far more attractive to people than trying to deal with the difficult issues. He explained that he used to run a course called ‘Enquirers’ which raised questions like: ‘Is there a God? What About Suffering? What About Other Religions? Does The Bible Contradict Itself?’ and it used to attract about eight people. But since it was changed into Alpha, “the whole thing took off”. Gumbel claimed that the groups provided the opportunity for participants to “tell us what you think”, in particular about the issue of suffering (the most commonly raised), and at the end of the discussion, the leader is encouraged to sum up the discussion.

When asked about how Alpha fitted into the history of revival movements in the church, Gumbel pointed out that it differed from those movements linked to individuals (Moody and Sankey, Billy Graham etc.) in that it was based in the local church. He wanted to emphasise its ecumenical nature and particularly noted the interest of the Catholic church in Alpha which he attributed to Alpha’s concern to build up the church. He also pointed to the present Pope’s interest in re-evangelization, and believed that the Archbishop of Canterbury had given a similar lead. Gumbel clearly wants Alpha to be seen as mainstream within the church and values the approval of church leaders. This desire is also evident, for example, in the publishing of sixty-four detailed commendations of Alpha from church leaders on the first ten pages of Telling Others (Gumbel, 1997 edition), although many of these are from churches in the Evangelical tradition.

On the origins of Alpha, Gumbel spoke enthusiastically of stumbling across a way of making disciples that actually worked and which was bringing hundreds of people to faith. He had never seen anything that worked on this scale before. Its main strength, he believed, was that anyone could do it. A church did not require great resources. It was accessible, he believed.

For Gumbel, the Holy Spirit Weekend is critical and it is vital that the Charismatic element is maintained so as to balance the intellect with experience, by which he
means the direct experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit with all the visible evidence which that entails. Gumbel said of *Alpha*, and particularly of the Weekend:

It recognises that we’re in a post-Enlightenment culture where a mere intellectual approach is not going to work. People need experience, and hence the experience on the Weekend, experience of community, these are the things that have to be brought in balance also with the appeal to the mind, which mustn’t be thrown out. I don’t think we should just throw out linear reasoning because we’re moving into a post-Enlightenment society. I think there’s a place for reason but it has to be balanced as the New Testament balances the heart and the mind, the explanation and the experience.

Gumbel was asked whether he thought *Alpha* had an educational role as well as an evangelistic one. He replied that he saw it as the beginning of a process of Christian education: term one of a two-year programme. He said that churches use other follow-up material, and again quoted the example of the Catholic church, which uses post-*Alpha* Catholic teaching. He did see adult Christian education as a lifelong process which never stops. When questioned about the closed-ended nature of *Alpha* (aiming for a particular result) rather than it being open-ended and exploratory, Gumbel compared it with early church catechesis which was intended to bring a person to baptism. It had a purpose. I then put to him Martyn Percy’s description of *Alpha* as catechetical rather than evangelistic, and he responded that *Alpha* has the effect of bringing people to faith (hence, evangelistic). He described how people come to *Alpha* from outside the church, gradually discover what Christianity is about and see how “the whole thing begins to fit together”. But Gumbel is also aware of the attractive quality of the community and the way in which it draws people in through the building of relationships. He notes that people say things like: “I’ve never experienced an atmosphere like this - love and acceptance.”

Gumbel was asked how he felt about criticism of *Alpha*. In particular I put to him Pete Ward’s comparison of *Alpha* with McDonald’s (Ward, 1998), namely that the packaging and the marketing are excellent, but the product is a bit flat, uniform and bland. Gumbel responded that the criticism of uniformity could equally have been made of Cranmer’s Prayer Book, of which it was not permissible to alter a single word. He was particularly concerned that when people went on an *Alpha* course they should not be disappointed by finding that what was on offer did not match up to what was advertised. The integrity of the course must be maintained so that people could recommend an *Alpha* course with confidence; hence the copyright statement. He suggested that if a church didn’t like *Alpha* the way it was intended, they should run something else rather than alter it. When Ward’s description was put to him again (“flat, uniform and bland”) he said that he would leave it to other people to judge whether or not that was the case, and that what he was trying to present was New Testament Christianity.

I put to Gumbel Martyn Percy’s criticism of *Alpha* (Percy, 1997) that the teaching about the Holy Spirit seemed to be entirely concerned with the individual and ignored
“the Spirit’s work in creation, justice, peace, reconciliation and the wider church.” Gumbel said that he liked Martyn Percy a lot, but felt that he had been slightly misused by the Church Times (the Church Times published extracts from his original article). He didn’t accept the criticism. He said that the first talk starts with the Holy Spirit in creation and that there is a great deal about justice and peace “and the fruit of it is that people get involved in those things, so that you have this whole social action movement coming out of Alpha”. He went on to quote the examples of two “social action projects” and the work in prisons. He denied that Alpha was individualistic. He said “the whole thing is that it’s a shift away from individualism to community, because the whole thing is not ‘the speaker’ - the individual response - it’s the church and people experiencing community. So it’s exactly the opposite to an individualism. It’s community.”

Gumbel said, when asked, that he welcomed criticism because “we can always learn from it, even if ninety per cent of it you disagree with or there’s nothing you can do about it.” He pointed out that many of the criticisms he received tended to cancel each other out, e.g. too much or too little on substitutionary atonement, too much or too little about the love of God, etc. I put to him that some might see the Holy Spirit Weekend and the teaching associated with it as marking Alpha out as clearly belonging to the Charismatic Evangelical wing of the church, thus narrowing its appeal. Gumbel responded that the Catholics approve of it because of its ‘mystical’ dimension, while some Pentecostals thought it didn’t go far enough. Similarly, “If you are a Pentecostal in South America it’s obvious that we’ve veered off in the conservative Evangelical direction, but if you’re a conservative Evangelical it looks as if we’ve veered off in the Charismatic direction.” Put in a global perspective, where the largest forces are the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal churches, he believed Alpha’s position was central. He said he wanted to keep the balance between Easter (the Cross and Resurrection) and Pentecost (the coming of the Holy Spirit). He emphasised (again) that the Pope also stressed this balance in his recent jubilee letter.

Gumbel was then asked if the Holy Spirit Weekend owed anything to the Toronto Blessing. Were there similarities? (The Toronto Blessing was a phenomenon whereby the Holy Spirit came upon people and provoked clear physical manifestations, crying, shaking, feelings of hot and cold, falling over, etc., similar to those described earlier in relation to the ‘Ministry Time’ on an Alpha Holy Spirit Weekend. The TB was launched in the United Kingdom at HTB. See Richter and Francis, 1998, and Chapter Two above). He was at pains to separate the two. He said that Alpha has been running since 1977, Questions of Life (the book containing the Alpha talks) was published in March 1993, and Toronto came to fame in 1994. “The syllabus for Alpha, or that section on the Holy Spirit, has not changed.... well not as a result of anything that happened in Toronto in 1994”.

I asked Gumbel about the adaptability of Alpha, pointing out that one minister who wished to adapt it to his own situation but was refused permission, stopped using it. Gumbel said that people were free to give their own talks, using their own words and their own illustrations and applications that are relevant to the people they are
speaking to. I put to him that there was some discontent over the emphasis on ‘tongues’, and that if it is the local church which must conform to Alpha in its emphasis on tongues, rather than vice-versa, couldn’t this be seen as Alpha using the local church rather than the local church using Alpha? Gumbel replied that the minister concerned clearly didn’t like Alpha and therefore should run something else. Gumbel was again at pains to defend the integrity of the Alpha course, i.e. that it should be run without significant omissions - in particular the Holy Spirit Weekend - so that it can be recommended with confidence.

As the interview approached its end, Mark Elsdon-Dew, Nicky Gumbel’s Communications Director, who had been sitting in, expressed his frustration that so many of the articles that had been written about Alpha questioned whether Alpha works. He was quite clear that it did work and could not understand why people didn’t just accept that it worked and explore the much more interesting question of why it worked.

Gumbel also hinted at his frustration with people who wanted to take out the Weekend. He referred to the questionnaires which people completed at the end of the course, which asked the questions: ‘Were you a Christian before you started the course? How would you describe yourself now? When and how did the change occur?’ He said that anyone could look through those questionnaires and see the number of times people talk about the Weekend and, if they did, he didn’t think they would be so keen to take out that part of the course.

I took this opportunity to question Gumbel about what I have described earlier as the ‘de-Christianization’ process (see Chapter Four), whereby someone who would have described themselves as a Christian before the course started becomes convinced during the course that they were not a proper Christian, but they then become one by the end of the course. Hence what has happened is that that person has not so much become a Christian as changed from one kind of Christian into another. I referred to Gumbel’s guidance to group leaders, given at the Alpha Conference, that at the beginning the leader should try to get a statement from the most sceptical group member, expressing their scepticism, so that others will feel comfortable in expressing the same view, otherwise people will simply lay down their Christian credentials (‘I used to sing in the choir, go to Sunday School,’ etc.). It is, after all, conversion stories that will be looked for later. This part of the interview went as follows:

SB
Do you think that any of those who do the course (who would have thought of themselves as Christians before they did the course) come to the conclusion during the course that they weren’t a proper Christian before, but then by the end of the course they are? You were saying that in the group the first thing that people do is they lay down their Christian credentials (‘I used to sing in the choir’, ‘I was taken by my parents’, etc.) and you were suggesting that the group leader try to encourage the most sceptical person to speak first and then others will tend to follow.
NG
Other people will then feel free to express their.....

SB
They'll be less inclined to.....

NG
Less inclined to feel that "because I'm in a church I must sound Christian. I've got to impress the vicar", rather than actually saying, 'I don't believe', which is often what they......

Gumbel clearly sensed the suggestion of manipulation, i.e. that people are being led into making sceptical statements which they don't really believe. He prefers to think of the leader as providing the freedom for people to express their genuine scepticism. Gumbel again wants clarity about what constitutes a Christian. Whatever people might claim for themselves, Gumbel makes his own assessment:

SB
Do you think that people, once they engage on the course, though they might have called themselves Christians before, have come to realise through the course that in fact they weren't really Christians?

NG
I think the word Christian is used in different ways in our society. A lot of people would say, 'Yes, I'm a Christian', by which they mean, 'I lead a good life. I lead a Christian life. I don't go to church, I don't believe in God. I don't believe in Jesus....'

SB
If I go to church occasionally?

NG
Yes, or they may never go to church, but they say at the beginning of the course, if you said, 'Are you a Christian?' they might say, 'Yes, of course I'm a Christian.' 'I've never deliberately been horrible to anybody. Of course I'm a Christian.'

SB
But during the course?

NG
They might come to realise that, all right...... We never say to anybody: 'No, you're not a Christian' because we never go behind people's profession of faith. If anyone says they're a Christian we accept them on the basis of their profession of faith. But I think for some people the word 'Christian' simply means 'nice person', and all they're saying is: 'I'm a nice person.' Hopefully during the course of the day they realise that Christianity is about Christ and they must bear some relationship to Christ to be a Christian, rather than just a nice person, or a person who happens to have been born in England.
Here Gumbel's clear emphasis on what he calls 'some relationship with Christ' takes priority over ethical considerations when judgements are being made (as indeed they are) about who is a Christian and who isn't. It also raises the question of what people are being converted from, and what they are being converted to. In many cases it may be that they are being converted from a form of Christianity based in large part on an ethic derived from the teachings of Jesus as found primarily in the Synoptic Gospels (see for example the "sheep and goats" passage in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25 verses 31 - 46, or the principle: "love God and love your neighbour as yourself", found in Luke, chapter 10 verse 27) to a form of Christianity based on a personal acceptance of a penal substitution theory of atonement and a 'relationship to Christ' derived largely from the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles of St Paul (see, for example, John's Gospel, chapter 3, verse 16, and Romans, chapter 3, verses 23 - 25) and - this being Evangelicalism of a Charismatic nature - further validated by the gift of 'tongues' (see I Corinthians, chapters 12 - 14). This is consistent with Hunt's view that the net effect of Alpha is to extend Charismatic Christianity in the churches (Hunt, 2001, p. 118) rather than recruiting significant numbers of people entirely new to the church. Gumbel's emphasis belongs to a long and honourable tradition of Evangelical Christianity, but it is not the only tradition and not, as Gumbel seems to be implying, the only authentic way of being Christian.

The sharp distinction evident here and at the beginning of the interview, in Gumbel's experience and understanding, between those who have a Christian faith and those who do not, reflects Alpha's own theological stance and its apparent lack of recognition of the experience of having been brought up within the Christian faith, and of the experience of Christian faith, shared by many, as something which grows and develops, rather than as something which one either has or doesn't have. The same lack of recognition is apparent in the formulaic nature of the testimonies published in Alpha News (see Chapter Four) where early exposure to religion must be dismissed as irrelevant nominalism rather than be seen as a formative influence. Hence, all hinges on the conversion experience which, for Alpha, is most likely to occur, if it occurs at all, at the Holy Spirit Weekend.

Gumbel denied any link between the Holy Spirit Weekend and the earlier Toronto Blessing but, given the similarities and the common origins, it is difficult not to see the Ministry Time on Alpha as related to the Ministry Time of the Toronto Blessing. The TB attracted some negative publicity at the time because of reports of extreme behaviour including: "Bodily weakness and falling to the ground.....shaking, trembling, twitching and convulsive bodily movements.....uncontrollable laughter or wailing and inconsolable weeping.....apparent drunkenness....animal sounds....intense physical activity" (Richter and Francis, 1998). Sandy Millar, Vicar of HTB, said at the time: "These manifestations are restoring to us the intimacy with God for which we cried out when we first became Christians" (Church Times, 23 September 1994, p7, quoted in Richter and Francis, 1998). It may be that in Gumbel's desire to have Alpha accepted as mainstream orthodox Christianity he wishes to distance it from the Toronto Blessing, but the interviews conducted for this research appear to indicate
that the Ministry Time on *Alpha* is indeed a toned-down version of the Ministry Time of the Toronto Blessing.

Gumbel claims that any church can run *Alpha*, and it is true that in the deaneries researched most churches purchased the videos (though churches in more deprived areas may not find it so easy) but finding competent and confident group leaders and back-up (assistant leaders, caterers, organisers etc.) to sustain the momentum over the number of courses which Gumbel believes it is necessary to run before it makes a real impact outside the church, requires considerable human resources and energy. Few of the people I interviewed indicated that the course had been run more than a few times at their church, and for most it was only once or twice. There was often only enough people to sustain one or two groups, and these were made up overwhelmingly of existing churchgoers and, judging from their descriptions, were not led as clearly as *Alpha* intended. The scale of operation which HTB and other large Evangelical churches are able to mount is clearly very different from that of the ordinary churches which attempted to run *Alpha* in the deaneries in which the present research was conducted. There appears to be a real disjuncture between what goes on at HTB, the accounts given in *Alpha News*, and the reality of running an *Alpha* course in an ordinary parish church. The interviews revealed that this was also true of the Holy Spirit Weekend which Gumbel regards as so central to the course. For most people running *Alpha*, the Holy Spirit Weekend became a Holy Spirit Day; for many the content was at the very least altered to reduce the Charismatic element, and some people on the course were simply not able to get there at all.

A criticism often levelled at Evangelicalism is that it is individualistic - being concerned with saving the individual’s soul rather than with any engagement with society at large. Gumbel claimed, when challenged, that *Alpha* was not individualistic, but led to people experiencing community. However, there seems to be some confusion here. *Alpha* does involve ‘community’ in the sense that it requires a group of people to put it on and create a welcoming context for newcomers, and once one has gone through the conversion experience one becomes part of that community. But people join that community on an individual basis. Each one has to have a direct experience of the Holy Spirit and an individual conversion. That is quite evident in the time of ‘Ministry’ (see Chapter Five) which occurs at the heart of the Holy Spirit Weekend. Again, *Alpha* distinguishes clearly between being a Christian and not being a Christian. It insists there has to be a moment at which one changes from one state to the other, and this can only occur on an individual basis. This clear individual conversion has always been a key characteristic of Evangelical Christianity, both conservative and Charismatic and is very much part of *Alpha*, but it is not an essential part of what it is to be a Christian as understood by all churches. This is an issue upon which, contrary to what *Alpha* claims, not all Christians are agreed. Gumbel’s response is to question the legitimacy of the latter’s claim to be Christian at all.

When questioned about his strategy of encouraging people to express their scepticism about Christianity at the start of the course, Gumbel simply explained that he didn’t want people to feel obliged by the situation to lay out their church ‘credentials’.
There is a fine balance here. If Gumbel is right, and people will emphasise their church background if they believe it is what is wanted, then they are just as likely to express scepticism if they believe that that is what is wanted. The fact remains that it is expressions of scepticism that are being looked for. The conversion when it comes, and hence the effectiveness of Alpha are then all the more apparent.

He also claims that moving from his original ‘Enquirers’ course which looked at broad religious issues (like suffering and other religions) to the Alpha course meant that “the whole thing took off”. This could be interpreted as meaning either that Pete Ward is right and people prefer to be told what to think rather than have to wrestle with the issues (see above) or the course is simply attracting existing Christians who find the talks congenial. Gumbel believes that the talks are now (unlike when he inherited the course) aimed at people outside the church, yet the evidence of the present research would question how successful that strategy has been, at least in the two deaneries targeted. The very titles of the talks (see Chapter Three) and the evidence of the interviews would suggest that the course remains a largely internal exercise with little impact on those with no faith. Gumbel said that the difficult issues could be dealt with in the groups, but the interviews conducted above suggest that either objections are not raised or, if they are, the group leaders may be ill-equipped to handle them. The discussions tended to be the sharing of experiences, but without any real depth. Gumbel claimed that the discussions in the groups can be free-ranging and might raise broader issues than those addressed in the talks. However, each group leader is encouraged to sum up under predetermined categories which clearly assume Gumbel’s answers: ‘Human Freedom, God Working Through Suffering, and God Being Involved in our Suffering’. This appears to indicate that Alpha is essentially about supplying answers - often to questions which people aren’t actually asking - rather than exploration. Gumbel’s clear evangelistic purpose in his talks, the lack of opportunity for any real engagement with his arguments or opportunity to discuss alternatives, and the relentless drive towards the goal of conversion all appear to raise questions about whether Alpha really does offer anything as educational and open-ended as ‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’.

To utilize a phrase of the educationalist Antonio Faundez, on Alpha “knowledge comes ready made” (Freire and Faundez, 1989, p.34). Despite its claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, in fact it offers the opportunity to take or leave one particular set of answers. By contrast, Faundez advocates a process of discovery. An education which involves asking questions rather than supplying answers is the only one...

which is capable of stimulating people’s capacity to experience surprise, to respond to their surprise and solve their real fundamental, existential problems.

(Freire and Faundez, 1989, p.34).

Alpha hopes to solve people’s “real fundamental existential problems”, but, in contrast to Faundez, believes this is best done through a course which sets out quite clearly what is required.
PART FOUR - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis set out to address two research questions:

Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?

and:

What is the function of Alpha’s teaching?

The latter question refers to both the content and methods of the teaching.

The two chapters of Part Four draw conclusions to both these questions from the data collected. The limitations of the present research are stated and recommendations made for future research. Conclusions to the first question, being the primary question, are dealt with in the final chapter.

Chapter Nine - The Function of Alpha’s Teaching

Alpha may be understood as a revivalist movement, beginning in the Church of England at Holy Trinity Brompton, and spreading into many other denominations in the UK and abroad. The revivalism of Alpha is not, however, an entirely new phenomenon.

As described in Chapter Two, Alpha shares with previous religious ‘Revivals’ or ‘Awakenings’ a predilection for head-counting, an appeal to those whose existing faith is seen as lacking, and a ‘bottom-up’ approach which has little time for existing church structures or practice. It similarly cuts across denominations, though not traditions, emphasises the importance of scripture, though not biblical criticism, emphasises individual conversion rather than the diverse life of the church, and emphasises the word rather than the sacrament. Gumbel would like Alpha to be seen as local church based rather than ‘famous speaker’ based, but inevitably his own name has become synonymous with Alpha, and for those who use the video-tapes, it is Nicky Gumbel they see. There are divergences, however, between Alpha and previous movements. Gumbel is keen that Alpha should be perceived as mainstream Christianity, approved by church leaders from all denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. Alpha also has a Charismatic emphasis, not to be found, for example, to anything like the same extent, in the work of Billy Graham. Though Nicky Gumbel was at pains to point out that, looked at from a world-wide perspective where Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism are the predominant Christian forces, the Charismatic content of Alpha (particularly its emphasis on speaking in tongues) is not out of place, nevertheless, in this country, particularly in the mainstream denominations (and Nicky Gumbel is a Church of England curate) the Holy Spirit Weekend and the emphasis on glossolalia (tongues) are perceived, particularly amongst clergy, as making the course unbalanced. As such, it appears that all but the most Charismatic churches which use it play down or omit this element, despite it being seen by Gumbel as fundamental to the course.

Writers on postmodernism such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault have analysed the way in which language can be used to wield power and control (see Chapter Two), and these insights have been utilized to examine the way in which
language is used on Alpha; for example, easy use of the word ‘Christian’ to define people who meet the required Alpha criteria, use of the word ‘Ministry’ to mean a narrowly Charismatic experience, equating faith with credulity in unquestioningly accepting accounts of miraculous happenings, and asking people who may not have the theological skills to respond, if they have ever been ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ with all the Charismatic Evangelical theological undertones which that superficially innocent question carries. (If they answer ‘yes’ then they have bought into the regime, if they answer ‘no’ it appears they are spiritually lacking. If they ask for an explanation it seems they are not proper Christians but want to know more about Alpha. What actually needs challenging is the theological basis of the question, i.e. the assumption that being filled with the Holy Spirit is a discrete, repeatable and individual experience, yet Gumbel and Millar know that such a challenge is unlikely to be forthcoming in the situation).

Both the content and the presentation of Alpha are protected. Anyone caught photocopying parts of the material may have their right to put on Alpha “reassessed” (The Alpha Administrators Handbook, 1999, p.180). HTB claims to be worried not so much about loss of revenue as about “sub-standard” copies. While it is true that such copies will naturally not have the same appeal as well-produced copies, HTB’s prohibition seems to imply that Christianity is only acceptable if it is offered in a professional, polished way, like a commodity. This raises significant questions about the nature of the version of Christianity being marketed. If the packaging can have such a profound effect on the content, then just how substantial is it?

The fourteen Church of England (Gumbel’s own denomination) clergy who were interviewed clearly did not agree unreservedly with the course (see Chapter Eight). Clergy appear to fall into three categories in their attitudes towards Alpha. Firstly, there are those who will not use it because they have profound suspicions of its Charismatic agenda, and theological reservations about its teaching, particularly its use of penal substitution theology. Secondly, there are those who share many of these reservations but are attracted by the evangelistic claims and are prepared to compromise on some theological teaching, and omit or modify other, most notably that on the Holy Spirit, despite the infringement of copyright. These clergy interviewed were usually modest in the claims they made for Alpha’s success, and in some cases indicated it had achieved little or nothing. The third group of clergy are those who share the theological outlook of Alpha and would credit it with great success in their own churches. Many of their claims are impressionistic, however, hence the need for the present research which attempts to put a human face on some of the claimed statistics. The clergy interviewed comprised a mixture of theological viewpoints and ecclesiastical traditions (liberal, conservative, Charismatic, Evangelical and catholic) and between them they expressed reservations about the lack of emphasis on the sacraments and the treatment of the Holy Spirit, particularly the perceived overemphasis on speaking in tongues. Indeed virtually all who had run Alpha had significantly altered or completely omitted the Holy Spirit Weekend. They were also worried about the cult status of being an Alpha church. They saw the packaging and presentation as impressive and liked the meal and friendly environment, though saw it as primarily for those with a church background, its main
function being within the existing church. There was some concern about what was perceived as the middle class ethos, and some were worried that it hurried people into conversion with a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ attitude. Some also saw it as too narrow, with little material on church life and worship. Most thought it offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life only within the context of a particular understanding of Christian faith rather than in the wider sense in which it might be understood by people in general. As an introduction to Christianity, the clergy thought it was deficient in a number of areas, usually related to the emphases of their own particular tradition - e.g., the more conservative wanted greater emphasis on the ‘reliability’ of the bible, while others wanted a greater emphasis on the sacraments, the life of the church or social, ethical and environmental issues.

The overwhelming majority of the Alpha Graduates interviewed were churchgoers with a church background. This is unsurprising as most of the recruitment took place through existing church channels. None claimed to have been attracted just by the national poster campaign. Their own perception was that the courses they attended were made up entirely or almost entirely of existing churchgoers. Where a non-churchgoer was present initially, they usually dropped out (see Chapter Eight). Most enjoyed the talks and found themselves in agreement with the content, and some had repeated the course. Similarly, most enjoyed the group discussions, not so much for their rigour in tackling issues of concern as for the social interaction and relationships formed. The subject of suffering frequently arose in the groups, but involved the sharing of personal experiences rather than any attempt to locate it in the theological scheme being propagated in the talks. Similarly, discussion of ‘other religions’ arose spontaneously in many of the groups but, without any input from the talks, the discussions appeared to lack any depth, despite it being a difficult issue for some committed Christians in the groups. Other subjects listed on the questionnaires and occasionally arising in the groups suffered a similar fate. The groups apparently provided a pleasant social experience for the already-committed and like-minded, but did not really satisfy those who wanted a more rigorous and well-informed discussion. Those few who were from outside the church appeared to feel at best uncomfortable, and at worst excluded. Again, however, this is only an indication of what happened in two Church of England deaneries and, though the results may give some hint as to what might be happening elsewhere, it is important not to extrapolate automatically or too widely.

The most controversial aspect of the course and that which impacted most profoundly on those who participated in it was the Holy Spirit Weekend or, more usually, Day (see Chapter Eight). This was clearly the point at which the Charismatic nature of the course came to the fore. For some it was a benevolent, positive experience; for others it was violent and extreme. It left some feeling spiritually refreshed, and others confused and even alienated. In all cases it proved an extreme emotional experience, and some thought it had been deliberately intended to be so and were concerned about manipulation. There was shaking, tears, laughter, sensations of heat, speaking in tongues, and there were feelings of both euphoria and bewilderment. Some expressed suspicions of group hysteria and others were worried about the effect on emotionally vulnerable people and the possibility of a sense of failure and
disappointment when ‘nothing happened’. There is a real question here as to whether these experiences are therapeutic or whether they are exploitative, quite apart from the issue of their authenticity (i.e. are these experiences generated from within the course, or are they the result of an outside agency, i.e. the Holy Spirit?). The answer to this latter question seems to depend on one’s theological inclinations rather than any kind of disinterested examination. How can one judge? Is it possible to prove or disprove supernatural intervention? For some, the test will be the ‘fruits’. Do these experiences lead the individual to achieve greater wholeness and ultimately create a more caring society, or are they purely self-indulgent or, worse, actually psychologically damaging? Or is it all, as the cynic might suggest, just a harmless bit of fun for those gullible people who enjoy that sort of thing? Indeed, is it worth pursuing truth and exposing humbug at all, if no harm is being done? But what concerns some is not so much the exploits of what is in effect a minority within the church as a whole, but the claim of universality, and the growing influence of a constituency which sees those remaining outside of it as second-class Christians, if indeed Christians at all.

When asked about the sort of people Alpha was likely to work best with, the consensus was that at least some Christian background or knowledge was required, though a few thought it could work with anyone. Many also mentioned the impression gleaned from the videos, and confirmed that in their experience it was likely to appeal primarily to those from a similar social background to Nicky Gumbel and the congregation of Holy Trinity Brompton, i.e. young, middle-class, well-educated and well-to-do. Gumbel suggests that there could be some minor alterations to the course to accommodate different social groups (he suggests quoting Bobby Charlton instead of Bernard Levin, though without explaining exactly what such a quotation from the footballing hero might be) but it may be that the cultural limitations of the course run rather deeper than this.

In general, when asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha (see Chapter Eight) the Alpha graduates spoke primarily of the meal, the warmth of the fellowship and the accessibility of the course, but were worried about its limited appeal and the problems identified above with regard to the Holy Spirit Weekend. There were seventy identifications of strengths against forty-nine of weaknesses. In such a sample there are no clear conclusions to be drawn in terms of making judgements of strengths over weaknesses or vice-versa, but given the overwhelming numbers of churchgoers involved, and given Alpha’s universalistic claims about the Christian nature of the course, a large number of criticisms of fundamental aspects of the course, like the Holy Spirit Weekend and Alpha’s limited appeal to those outside the church, should be a matter of concern.

The archdeacon interviewed echoed the sense that Alpha was dealing largely with ‘recycled’ Christians and was concerned with the status issue of being an ‘Alpha Church’. The Charismatic agenda was too dominant, the content too rigid, and the course didn’t really help people to grow spiritually. He also did not like the triumphalist tone of Alpha News. The bishop interviewed gained the impression that Alpha was creating Confirmation candidates but was concerned about its over-use
and had problems with some of the Charismatic Evangelical theology. Like many others, he was impressed by the socialising aspect, particularly the meal, and Gumbel’s skills of communication. Unlike the archdeacon, the bishop did think that the course offered people the opportunity to begin to explore ‘the meaning of life’, but only in the sense that in giving people a certain amount of the Christian faith it was giving them the tools to address the ultimate questions (such as those raised on the questionnaires).

Pete Ward, in his interview (See Chapter Eight) also shared this view that Alpha only offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life if you shared the Christian premise (“if you buy that Jesus is the meaning of life”). He was also sceptical of the view that Alpha offers a universally agreed version of Christianity (“complete nonsense”) and acknowledged that everyone alters the teaching on the Holy Spirit. He recognised the “badge of liveliness” that being an Alpha church brought, and his impression was that it was winning new converts. These may be very few, but he believed any number had to be a positive thing. For him, it met the consumer demand for simplicity and clarity. He clearly saw the church’s difficulty in wanting both to educate and evangelise at the same time; he wanted to avoid “imperialistic frameworks” but the Evangelical in him was keen to bring people to a commitment. The Evangelical in Ward also, by the time of his interview, led him to regret some of his earlier criticisms of Alpha (Ward, 1998).

The interview with the Revd Nicky Gumbel was intended to discover the origins and nature of the theological underpinning of Alpha. For example, the emphasis on a moment of conversion (which Alpha shares with most Evangelical thinking) can be clearly located in Gumbel’s own experience. He spoke of knowing “the difference between having a faith and not having a faith”, yet there was no recognition that for many lifetime Christians, faith is an emerging, growing phenomenon, without a clearly definable beginning. Hence, when Gumbel speaks of his kind of conversion experience he does not seem to recognise that he does not speak for all who would claim to be Christians; but then there seems to be some doubt about whether he would recognise the legitimacy of any other way of being a Christian at all.

Gumbel would not accept the criticism that there is a strong Charismatic bias to the course as evidenced most strongly on the Holy Spirit Weekend. As described above, he wanted to put the teaching into a worldwide context where the two biggest churches are the Roman Catholic and the Pentecostal. He then sees Alpha’s teaching as central. However, this denies the reality that, though Alpha does take place in other countries, it is largely centred in the UK (according to Alpha News, No. 28, July 2002, p.1, a third of all those who attended Alpha courses in 2001 did so in the UK) where it is perceived by many clergy and lay participants and observers as Charismatically weighted, and in practice is altered for use accordingly despite copyright restrictions. The Charismatic element apparent at the Holy Spirit Weekend is also strongly reminiscent of the Toronto Blessing (see Chapter Two) and, despite Gumbel’s protestations, the two are clearly linked. Like Alpha, the Toronto Blessing had its origins at Holy Trinity Brompton, but attracted negative criticism because of the eccentric behaviour involved. It appears that to gain mainstream acceptance for
Alpha, Gumbel wants to distance it from that extreme phenomenon, yet the same criticisms of emotional manipulation and hysteria to which the Toronto Blessing was open, could also apply to the ‘Ministry Time’ on the Holy Spirit Weekend.

To some tastes Alpha offers too little on the sacraments or the church for a course offering Christian basics, and there is too much emphasis on recruitment. Then, the recruits having got on board, this version of Christianity doesn’t actually take them anywhere (see Gladwin, 1998, pp.183&184), but merely offers more of the same; hence the phenomenon of the ‘Alpha-holic’ who repeats the course, or others who later leave when the excitement wears off, and (what worried some clergy) the cult status of being an ‘Alpha’ church. The test of Christian authenticity for Alpha appears to be the number of courses run and the number of people who have been on them, hence the avalanche of statistics triumphantly quoted in every edition of Alpha News. However, a problem for the wider mission of the church is that those who reject Alpha may believe they are rejecting the whole of Christianity rather than simply one manifestation of it. In any case, as observed earlier, can one really learn to become a Christian on a course, as one might learn a foreign language or computer skills? The clergy in particular were at pains to emphasise that Christian faith and commitment to the church depend primarily on relationship. If this is true, it may be that Alpha could omit the series of talks completely without any ill effect, since it is the meal and the groups which are most effective. But then churches have been offering such social events as part of their mission for many years. The most distinctive contribution of Alpha is the Holy Spirit Weekend and the drive towards a decision. At this point, many church leaders in particular baulked at the unbalanced nature of Alpha - its strongly Charismatic Evangelical agenda, especially the ‘Ministry Time’, with its miraculous healings, ecstatic manifestations, and in particular speaking in tongues. As well as theological reservations, there were suspicions of manipulation through emotional pressure and use of language.

Mark Ireland (Ireland, 2000, p.49) suggests that for a local church to benefit from using Alpha, it must make sure that what it offers on a Sunday accords with what the Alpha graduate has experienced on the course. In other words, the church should accommodate itself to Alpha, rather than alter Alpha to relate more closely to the realities of local church life and faith. Thus Alpha becomes not so much a tool for the church to use, as a controlling influence. Rather than the local church using Alpha to aid its mission, Alpha is using the local church to propagate its own version of Christianity; and HTB is controlling Alpha. Gumbel suggests that church leaders who don’t like Alpha should use something else. That would be acceptable were it not that Gumbel claims that Alpha provides the things upon which all Christians agree and that it is a course not of the basics of one version of Christianity but of Christianity itself. Such a claim embraces every church there is, whether it uses Alpha or not. To reject Alpha, then, is to reject not just a course, but Christianity. It is this claim of universality in conjunction with the narrowness of the content and the tightness of control from HTB which some people, in particular some clergy, find problematic. It is also this claim which makes it legitimate for those who have reservations about Alpha to challenge it rather than just find something else. It is this claim which means that those outside the church looking in at Alpha, or those who try it and find it
inadequate, may reject *Alpha* believing they have rejected the whole of Christianity rather than just one manifestation of it. Of those who may complete the course but are not converted, Gumbel says, "We hope they will be unable to say they have not heard the gospel" (Gumbel 1994a, p.26). But the great diversity of Christian belief and practice remains unexplored. These reasons counter the suggestion from some committed church members that if *Alpha* is bringing anyone at all into the church, it must be a good thing.

*Alpha*’s claim to being ecumenical in the sense that it pays little attention to denominations has also been shown to be misleading. It is not particularly interested in the dialogue which is characteristic of usual ecumenical ventures. Rather, it has a particular theological stance which can be identified as present in most denominations and gleans its greatest support from those strands (Charismatic, and to some extent conservative Evangelical) within each denomination. Unity, for Gumbel, means unity of doctrinal belief. Those churches which wish to place an emphasis on, for example, the sacraments, and see them as a central feature of the Christian tradition would have difficulty with *Alpha*, which clearly does not see them as important enough, or too controversial to be included. By contrast, speaking in tongues is apparently regarded as important and non-controversial enough to take a central place. There are in fact real theological difficulties and differences here to which *Alpha* seems unwilling or unable to face up. There is not the agreement about what is ‘basic’ to the Christian faith which Gumbel claims. Further, those who do not adopt Gumbel’s Charismatic stance are regarded as not “firing on all cylinders” (Gumbel, 1993, p.133). There are apparently first and second class Christians. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, Gumbel says that most Christians may have it, but not all are filled with it (see chapter ten in Gumbel’s *Questions of Life*, 1993). Or they may be “Christians without any real experience of God” by which is meant a demonstrable experience of a Charismatic type (Gumbel 1994a, p.26). There is a lack of generosity here towards Christians of other traditions. The same chapter identifies the objections which some may have towards *Alpha*’s pneumatology as stemming not from genuine theological reservations but from “doubt”, “fear” and “inadequacy”. Thus any potential criticism is stymied by casting doubt on the integrity of the critic, and the criticisms themselves remain unanswered. Yet *Alpha*’s is clearly not a world-view shared by all Christians. For example, the *Alpha* talks make it clear that the *Alpha* world-view is one in which God intervenes directly by putting thoughts and dreams into people’s heads, sometimes with an audible voice; and supernatural occurrences are to be expected. Words like ‘adulterer’ might appear on someone’s forehead, individuals are miraculously cured (though always of invisible complaints) and praying “turns up the voltage”. Those who take a different view have doubts cast upon the authenticity of their faith. They are “not prepared to believe that God can heal” (see chapter thirteen in Gumbel, 1993).

The centrality of the Ministry Time on *Alpha*, and particularly the emphasis on speaking in tongues has already been referred to (see Chapter Eight) in relation to the imbalance which many who run the course, or who have considered running it, feel *Alpha* suffers from. Also of concern is the pressure (despite denials) which is exerted on people to speak in tongues and to demonstrate other manifestations of the Holy
Spirit’s presence. Individuals are coached by example and advised to copy what they hear and not to be self-conscious. ‘Nothing happening’ is not an option (see Gumbel, 1994a, p.142). There is undoubtedly pressure to conform, and the suspicion of manipulation is strong.

Sandy Millar’s Video, Developing Ministry on Alpha (1999), has been examined in detail in Chapter Five. It exemplifies the reasons for the suspicions which leaders of non-Charismatic churches have of Alpha. Here the real Charismatic agenda begins to bite most strongly. The video is intended to be a training guide for those responsible for the Ministry Time at an Alpha Holy Spirit Weekend. The emotional and psychological pressures to be put on people (for example, if someone isn’t cured after being prayed for, then they are to be prayed for “again and again and again” until they are), the strange signs of the Holy Spirit (“eyelids fluttering”, “a sort of glow”) and his quite vitriolic condemnation of the “senior positions in the church” which are “riddled with unbelief” clearly set this phenomenon apart from the mainstream of the Church of England - the church of which Millar is an ordained minister. There is evidently the deliberate creation of an atmosphere where individuals are put into a heightened and susceptible emotional state, with little alternative but to conform to those who claim to speak on behalf of God (“I think God may be wanting to say something to you along these lines...” [Ministry Video, 1999]). It is understandable, therefore, that clergy who might otherwise find the course acceptable have difficulty with this particular element of it and change or omit it, despite its centrality to Alpha and its copyright protection. It also again renders Alpha’s claim to universality highly contentious.

Sandy Millar is quite clear that God approves of Alpha (“The Holy Spirit has adopted it” - Alpha Conference at HTB, November 2000) the evidence being the large number of churches which are running it. This obsession with numbers, evident not least in every edition of Alpha News, which always publishes tables of figures, allows little room for any other kind of assessment of Alpha. The issues of service to the world, visiting the sick and the bereaved, feeding the hungry, holiness in worship, a sense of the transcendent, faith, addressing people’s deepest needs, stewardship of the planet, and a host of other concerns which many Christians see as fundamental to Christian faith if it is not to be purely self-indulgent, do not get much recognition. The number of people going through Alpha is apparently a more important question than whether or not the world is a kinder place as a result. Mark Ireland’s concerns (Ireland, 2000), though he is not wholly uncritical of Alpha, also seem focussed on simply filling pews (see Chapter Six). Ireland’s criticisms of Alpha are really stymied, however, by his willingness to accept uncritically the impressions of clergy with regard to numbers of converts and his lack of rigour in questioning individuals to discover who, if any, are actually new to the church. Clergy who put on the course are not, as he assumes, disinterested observers.

At the same Conference (Alpha Conference at HTB, November 2000), Nicky Gumbel spelled out the number of times a church has to run Alpha before it breaks out of the church and into the community. It “needs to be run at least three times a year” and “you need to do it at least nine times to get the feel of it” and it takes “four
or five years to break through into the community”. Hence the course has to be run at least twelve times, and probably fifteen times before it begins to make any real impact. Clearly this is an extremely demanding programme for any church, and renders it unsurprising that, at least for those churches in the two deaneries in which the present research took place, this breakthrough has not been achieved. The number of times it has to be run before (it is claimed) it breaks out into the community means that any church which wishes to run it properly is locked into it for a long period and must commit to it a huge amount of resources in terms of time, money and person-power. If it requires so much, the question may be raised as to just how useful a tool it is, whether for evangelistic or educational purposes, and how clearly this timescale is laid out to churches which just want to give it a try. Compounding the difficulty, Millar stated at the Conference that *Alpha* is “the [definite article] evangelisation programme of the church”. He also appeared to take a harder line on exclusivity than Gumbel, claiming his opposition to abortion, euthanasia and cloning (all regarded as “Original Sin”) was the biblical view. There was no acknowledgement that other Christians may see these issues differently or understand the bible differently.

The *Alpha* publications give an indication of the way in which Scripture is used on the *Alpha* Course. This is largely uncritically so that, for example, Jesus’s words in John’s Gospel are regarded as the literal words of Jesus, even though they differ considerably from those in the Synoptic Gospels and despite the fact that most scholars would attribute a later date to John and would identify a heightened christology in its pages. This uncritical approach also leads to a ‘proof-text’ use of scripture. This is when a verse from the bible is found and read off to support a particular view on an issue, with little regard for context or conflicting biblical texts. This view is then seen as the ‘biblical’ view - a means of silencing opposition, since any questioning of the view expressed is regarded as challenging scripture and therefore inadmissible. This is characteristic of those who take a conservative view of scripture and occurs frequently in the *Alpha* literature, but is by no means universal in the church at large, again indicating *Alpha*’s theological and ecclesiastical limitations, despite the claim of universality. The same may be said of *Alpha*’s emphasis on a penal substitution theory of atonement, featured in the third chapter of Gumbel’s *Question of Life* (1993) and discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis. Similarly, Gumbel’s discussion of prayer (the sixth chapter / talk) focuses on ‘unanswered’ prayer and explanations for it (disobedience, wrong motives etc.) and is really a discussion again operating only within the parameters of Evangelical theology where prayer is primarily extempore and is about asking God for things and finding explanations when those things aren’t given. Prayer as understood in other Christian traditions, involving perhaps silence or meditation, the use of ancient prayers or ‘daily offices’ is ignored.

Probably the most worrying aspect of *Alpha* is what I have termed the ‘de-Christianizing’ process (see Chapter Four). Stephen Hunt (2001) noticed in his research, as I did in mine, the many people who completed an *Alpha* course and claimed to have been converted and yet who, on closer questioning, turned out to have been very much part of the church beforehand. Why, then, did they claim to
have been converted, and what were they converted to which they were not before? Hunt thinks they simply mean that they are more committed to their faith. However, the fact that before the course they would have called themselves Christians, and that by the end of the course they were denying that they were Christians before at all, but claiming that they are now, coupled with Gumbel's scepticism of anyone's claim to be a Christian who does not conform to his conversion criteria (see Chapter Eight) implies that something rather different is happening. This is further supported in the Alpha Testimonies (see Chapter Four) where previous experience of the church is caricatured and belittled. Gumbel wants to generate conversions, and this means preparing the ground carefully beforehand, hence Gumbel's instructions to group leaders to obtain, if possible, a statement from the most sceptical member of their group right at the beginning of the course so that other members of the group will be encouraged to express their scepticism rather than their faith (thus making their 'conversion' more real). When this point was put to Gumbel at his interview (see Chapter Eight) he sensed the implicit charge of manipulation and wanted to make it clear that the members of the group would feel free to express their doubts rather than feel they had to be on their best behaviour and say the right thing. Nevertheless, as explained (see Chapter Eight), if Gumbel is right, and people will emphasise their church background if they believe it is what is wanted, then they are just as likely to express scepticism if they believe that scepticism is what is wanted. The fact remains that it is expressions of scepticism that are being looked for. The 'conversion' when it comes, and hence the effectiveness of Alpha are then all the more apparent. There is a sense here of conversions being manufactured. Within the Alpha Testimonies too, a clear, predictable and well-established pattern of conversion is sought and generated - a pattern with similarities to one described forty years earlier in another context by R J Lifton (1961), (see Chapter Four).

This 'de-Christianization' process, by which people on Alpha courses come to believe that they were not proper Christians before they did Alpha (even though they previously thought they were), but they are now, not only illustrates Alpha's conviction that any versions of Christianity outside Alpha are suspect, but also that Alpha's main function is actually to expand its own version of Christianity within the existing wider Church. Some church leaders of non-Charismatic churches who run Alpha but have reservations about it are instinctively aware of this, which contributes to their changing or omitting the most emphatically Charismatic part of the course, namely the Holy Spirit Weekend. Gumbel appears to see the whole of the church, other than those who share his Charismatic Evangelical convictions, as being the mission field for his evangelistic activity. In this he bears out Monica Furlong's Observation (also quoted in Chapter Five):

What rarely gets put into words is that they [Evangelicals] do not believe that the other sections of the Church of England are the real thing. To spend much time around Evangelicals is to get the message that one is not saved at all, a difficult basis, in its confident one-upmanship, to carry on a continuing Christian conversation. (Furlong, 2000, p.333).
Thus, for *Alpha*, the faith of non-Charismatic Evangelical Christians is at best suspect and at worst inauthentic or misguided and they are in need of conversion every bit as much as those who are right outside the church. For this reason, non-Charismatic Evangelical churches should be wary of *Alpha*, as indeed some clergy interviewed instinctively were. In fact, this expansion is inevitable given the way that *Alpha* operates. Like other evangelistic campaigns, it works from the premise that people are converted first and then find a church afterwards. Martyn Percy has pointed out the problematic nature of this disassociation (see Percy, 1997, pp. 14&15), in that converts often fail to be properly integrated into the church, the reason being, as Pete Ward has pointed out: “Membership of a local church, regular Sunday worship and so on are simply not like *Alpha*” (Ward, 1998, p. 286). Those churches which are most like *Alpha* and which will offer the *Alpha* convert the most comfortable environment, will be those of a Charismatic Evangelical kind.

*Alpha* offers clear and simple certainties and a welcoming environment, and its utilization of contemporary popular culture in its packaging and presentation is impressive, as is its relaxed and entertaining style, but there is clearly a suspicion amongst some that both the mystery and the demands of Christianity are being sacrificed for the sake of popularity and possibly transient appeal. It strives to be fashionable, but thereby risks going the same way as all fashions. Is it able repeatedly to reinvent itself fast enough to keep up? And is this really what people want anyway? A good meal with friends, an entertaining video and an evening talking with like-minded people is clearly a pleasant experience for many who may spend their working day with colleagues who do not share their beliefs, but if the church is to attempt to meet people not only when they are feeling good but also at their points of deepest need, then the temporal trappings may fade into insignificance and ultimately fail to satisfy, because they avoid rather than confront the hard questions that people face. It may be, for example, that a suffering Christ speaks to people more eloquently in the midst of their own suffering than a charismatic ‘healer’ who insists on praying over them “again and again and again” until a result is secured, as at the Ministry Time on the Holy Spirit Weekend.

Any course, particularly one as short as *Alpha*, has to have limitations of scope, hence it deals with a certain number of issues which it considers to be the most fundamental. It is looking for agreement on the part of the participants - the agreement which is seen as vital if the subject is to become a Christian. The proponents of *Alpha*, with its copyright protection, seem to see the church as a community of individuals who all think and believe the same things and have had the same qualifying experiences. There are others, however, who would also call themselves Christians, who see the church as having more to do with a community who strive to seek, discover, and live as citizens of the Kingdom of God. This is a much more elusive and demanding idea, but perhaps more life-giving and truer to Jesus’ intentions, as apparent in his many parables. For them it is also much more difficult to identify the clear boundaries (for example, as to who is a Christian and who is not, who has faith and who has not, who has been filled with the Spirit and who has not) which *Alpha* seems to rely on. These kinds of clear boundaries are
fact generally alien to the Church of England, which tends to welcome enquirers and does not on the whole require of them a personal doctrinal affirmation of conversion. People may participate in the life of the church to whatever extent they feel comfortable and with whatever level of faith they have. When they feel ready to explore further and perhaps to move on to confirmation then they will be encouraged to do so, but there will be no sense in which they will be made to feel that they must make a commitment or else be excluded from the life of the church (communicant status aside). The Church of England tends to have ‘fuzzy edges’ and people are free to move in and out as they wish. Within the Alpha regime, however, there has to be a moment when one changes from not being a Christian (according to Alpha) to being one. Gumbel himself emphasises the difference between having a faith and not having a faith. One is either in or out. Alpha is essentially about separation from (perhaps even escape from), rather than engagement with the world. Its relationship with a church as diverse and yet as firmly embedded in the world as the Church of England is therefore bound to be problematic.

So what is really taking place on this course which claims to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life? Much of this thesis has explored the question through recording and analysing the recollections of participants. This grounded methodology has yielded much information about what is actually going on. The Alpha literature which describes the theological underpinning and the practical instructions for running the course has also been analysed to shed light on some of the techniques that are employed and give clues as to the function and purpose of Alpha. Some of the educational (or ‘re-educational’) techniques have been analysed with the help of literature drawn from other contexts which not only show quite sharp differences between Alpha and other forms of educational thinking, but also give clues as to how and why these techniques may be being used. The primary purpose here appears to be recruitment to the Alpha version of Christianity. Such recruitment to a religious community offering a narrow creed and a distinct subculture is not a new phenomenon. Hence Alpha has been placed in its historical context. The content and promotion of Alpha have also been examined, not just from a learning point of view but also from a theological and to some extent from an anthropological point of view (for example, its meal) as well as from social and cultural points of view (for example, its relationship with postmodernity and its utilization of popular culture: music, technology, language, informality etc.).

For some, Alpha appears to have a therapeutic value (food, friendship, attention and a welcoming environment) and this may be seen as valuable in itself, but it is contingent on accepting the Alpha belief system as authoritative, and laying aside independent critical thought. Questions may be asked at the ‘group’ stage, but there has to be a decision finally made one way or another - usually at the Holy Spirit Weekend. Some will clearly settle for this, and indeed may do so with considerable relief, but others may be more reluctant to relax their critical faculty. For those who see the pursuit of the meaning of life as a lifetime voyage of discovery rather than a package of beliefs, Alpha is unlikely to satisfy. The tightly controlled and minutely defined nature of Alpha, imply that Alpha is not so much an exploration as a highly
protected self-contained interpretation of Christianity which one either accepts in its entirety or leaves alone.

In practice it is primarily neither educational nor evangelistic, but rather its main function appears to be to reinvigorate the existing Charismatic community and to enlarge its constituency within the existing wider Church. It could only be regarded as a form of Christian education in that it introduces (on the whole) existing believers or lapsed practitioners to a different way of being Christian, or reaffirms the already-converted. It most commonly recruits Christians or near-Christians of a non-Charismatic kind and converts them (if it converts them at all) into Charismatic believers who subscribe to a version of Christianity espoused by Alpha. This recruitment of individuals who already have experience of the church is unsurprising as, despite the posters and leaflet drops, recruitment takes place largely through well-established church channels, and some Christian experience is required to recognise the language (e.g., 'filled with the Spirit'), the questions (e.g. 'How can I be sure of my faith?') and the beliefs (e.g. in a personal God) which Alpha takes for granted in its recruits. Those right outside the Church appear to be left largely unmoved. The small number interviewed who had no experience of Alpha and were not churchgoers, were unaware of the existence of the course, despite its advertising campaigns. Amongst this group there was a clear mismatch between what they would expect from a course claiming to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life and what Alpha actually offered. Only one interviewee amongst those who undertook an Alpha course could be said to have been drawn in by Alpha’s educational claim, and he left after finding himself in a minority of one amongst people who were already convinced of the truth of what Alpha was teaching. Those interviewed who had completed Alpha, being drawn overwhelmingly from within the existing church, might have been expected to be sympathetic to the course, and most indeed were, in the sense that they enjoyed it, but few claimed that it was functioning beyond the existing church.
Chapter Ten - An Opportunity to Explore the Meaning of Life?

Some religious communities may see their primary task in terms of providing answers, while others are more concerned with the quest for truth. Put simply, the former are more concerned with explicit evangelism, while the latter are more interested in learning. The dilemma for many churches is how to do justice to both, particularly as the ‘learning’ option, though valuing intellectual activity, may not win many converts. Alpha appears to be attempting to combine the two. It would like to be perceived by those outside the Church as educational, so as to attract people and avoid the stigma of being a specifically ‘church’ event which might deter many of the target audience, hence its offer of a ‘course’ (which implies learning) and an ‘opportunity to explore the meaning of life’ (which implies open-endedness). On the other hand, it would like to be perceived by those within the Church as evangelistic, because they might then be attracted to Alpha as a way of recruiting new members (a hope close to the hearts of most clergy and lay people involved in the Church’s life), hence its triumphalistic emphasis on numbers of new recruits in Alpha News, the latter’s circulation being entirely within Church circles. This research has been primarily concerned with testing Alpha’s claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.

As made clear in the Introduction, the Church has historically been concerned with both education and evangelism, though there are differing opinions as to what sort of education that should be. The phrases ‘religious education’ and ‘Christian education’ are in common use, the former generally referring to a subject taught in school (or possibly in higher education) in which no particular religious allegiance is assumed on the part of either the teacher or the taught. It may involve study of a variety of different religions, and the ultimate questions of human enquiry (e.g. Why are we here? Does life have any meaning or purpose?) may be pondered without any clear answer in view. Christian education, by contrast, is generally taken to refer to an activity confined to the Church in which its own concerns (prayer, the bible, the sacraments etc.) form the syllabus. There must surely be universal agreement that the latter is the business of the Church, but opinions vary, as demonstrated by this research, with regard to the extent to which the Church ought to be engaged in the former. The opinion of most of the clergy interviewed (see Chapter Eight) was that the Church ought to be engaged in both. Certainly, Alpha’s claim of an exploration is consistent with a ‘religious education’ approach, but could the content of Alpha be seen as legitimately educational in that sense? Could it be seen as really offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life? The results of the present research indicate that, in its preoccupation with subjects relating to the internal concerns of the Church, it cannot. Neither does it appear to offer much opportunity for real engagement with different perspectives even within the Church, and cannot allow itself to be influenced by other points of view. Indeed the ‘truth’ contained in the Alpha talks cannot be subjected to debate at all as it is protected by copyright. Any church which makes use of it must use it precisely as it is. Nicky Gumbel, the founder and primary presenter of Alpha, argues that the integrity of Alpha has to be protected from those who would distort it but continue to use the name. Yet this restriction also implies that Alpha contains the last word on what is true because it is not open to
change. In this respect, Alpha appears not only too narrowly based to be regarded as religious education, but does not permit the kind of latitude which one might expect even from the Christian education normally offered by the mainstream churches, and hence leaves itself open to the charge of indoctrination, as discussed in Chapter One. Anyone, Christian believer or otherwise, who is concerned to pursue truth through engagement and dialogue with other points of view must treat such a protected package with suspicion.

Many of the fourteen clergy who were interviewed did indeed have such suspicions. They were clear that the Church should continue to be engaged in its historic dual tasks of evangelism and education. It should be engaged in addressing specifically religious issues which concern believers (for example, prayer) but also the universal human issues, like whether life has any meaning. Hence the Church should be an agent of adult religious education. This again, however, raises the question of whether the Church’s perceived tasks of both evangelism and education are compatible and desirable. A way forward may be the recognition that the pursuit of truth at the heart of both religion and education could be a unifying factor. But the Church, if it is to maintain its integrity, must ensure that the educational opportunities it offers do not have hidden evangelistic agendas. There should be no need for such agendas, since truth, whether pursued in education or religion, is indivisible. The Church only needs to fear an open exploration if it believes that the quest for truth may lead away from itself, in which case some self-examination on the part of the Church may be appropriate.

Like Alpha, this thesis also attempts to straddle two disciplines, one being adult education, but the other being theology rather than evangelism (though other disciplines have been utilized as well). It has attempted to examine adult learning issues raised by the Alpha Course - in particular its claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life - and at the same time tried to discover the function of Alpha, essentially within the Church. However, these are not mutually exclusive areas. The Church has always been interested in adult learning, and indeed sees it as part of its overall mission. Alpha’s role in apparently fulfilling this aspiration is therefore of great interest within the Church. However, the converse is not necessarily true. University departments of adult education may have no particular interest in issues of concern to the Church. And while there are many departments of, and courses in religious education in higher education institutions, specifically concerned with school age education (usually involving the training of teachers) and which engage in research at the interface between these two areas, the same is not so evident for research in post-compulsory education. The present project would have fitted most easily into a university which offered expertise in both adult learning and theology and where there was co-operation between these two departments and a recognition that some research projects might straddle both disciplines. It could be argued that in a postmodern era such departmental barriers should be coming down and multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary research should become more common and more acceptable. Such an institution being unavailable, the present research has been carried out in a university department of educational studies, thus placing departmental parameters on the research questions addressed. However, in such a
project as this, addressing the fundamental educational research question, 'Does Alpha, as it claims, offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?', was bound to lead to ecclesiological questions; for example, if Alpha is not fulfilling that claim, then what is it offering and what is its function? Significantly, Stephen Hunt's research into Alpha (Hunt, 2001) experienced the same situation. Hunt is a sociologist, and in the Introduction to his book he makes it clear that his approach is "sociological rather than theological" (p.xvi) but he also asks, "What kind of Christianity is being advanced?", and explores the "working philosophy of Alpha" (p.xv). Specifically in chapter three of his book he describes some "theological objections" to Alpha.

The present research then, is concerned with adult learning research questions, primarily the claim of Alpha to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, but also with the theological and ecclesiological issues which inevitably arise in the process. Both are addressed in the course of the thesis, and the primary research question is answered below. The closely-related question of Alpha's function is answered in Chapter Nine.

As stated above, Alpha attempts to straddle two disciplines, those of education (the 'opportunity to explore the meaning of life') and evangelism. Yet the Alpha enterprise, and HTB which stands behind it, is essentially an evangelistic organisation. Can an evangelistic organisation ever be truly educational or will its approach always be confessional? Will there always be another agenda behind the one presented? Can it really offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life to anyone who doesn't already subscribe to the religious scheme being propagated? From the evidence of the present research, with all the limitations of its scale, the answer to the question of whether Alpha does indeed offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, appears to be no. The curriculum does not cover the claim, and so the claim falls. Indeed, given its evangelistic purpose, it cannot meet its claim. Education involves meeting educational needs, not evangelism. Alpha provides such an opportunity only for those who already share the beliefs evident in Alpha's teaching.

Some participants in Alpha, when asked whether the course provided the claimed opportunity to explore the meaning of life, said that it did but wished to qualify their answer by explaining that it provided such an opportunity if one accepted the Christian faith premise which underpinned the whole course. Many others said that it did provide such an opportunity and did not qualify their answer, but on further questioning it became clear that although they initially gave an unqualified yes, they were actually also working from a similar premise to the former group. They already shared the beliefs which were being propagated in the name of an 'exploration' and so they were happy to interpret 'exploration' here as simply having their beliefs explained to them in more detail and perhaps given a Charismatic Evangelical slant. Similarly, they were happy to interpret the phrase 'the meaning of life' in terms of the world-view offered by Alpha and largely or completely shared by them already. Like the clergy, some Alpha graduates did acknowledge that it was an exploration taking place essentially within the parameters of the Christian tradition, but they saw the claim as legitimate precisely because they were Christians. Some did see the
difficulty this would raise for those outside the church and how it would limit *Alpha*’s appeal.

*Alpha* makes the claim so as to appeal to those outside the church, yet there was little indication here that it was having the desired effect. Those from the adult education centre who were not churchgoers, and who might therefore be seen as people whom *Alpha* would like to target, did not regard a course which was in essence a presentation of Christianity as meeting the claim to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. They would expect something much broader, and gave suggestions as to what such a course might contain. The issues they would expect to be raised (see Table 2, Chapter Eight) turn out to be quite similar to the questions which Nicky Gumbel has discovered that people actually on the course would like to have raised (see *Searching Issues*, Gumbel, 1994b) but he has no intention of including them in the course because the course is actually intended to be evangelistic rather than educational (although the questions Gumbel identifies in his book in fact appear slanted towards those who already have a Christian belief - see Chapter Eight). The interview with Nicky Gumbel (2001) made it clear that he sees *Alpha* as designed to “put the positive case” rather than engage in debate about difficult issues which may concern people. He claimed that such questions could be dealt with in the groups, but this appears to be a way of sidelining them rather than taking them seriously. The group discussions are clearly going nowhere and appear to be intended to draw the sting of criticisms and dispose of alternative views rather than engage with them. Certainly he has no intention that the issues raised by people in the groups should play any part in the course proper. To do so, would be to “play a defensive shot” and “not score any runs”. Hence, the educational claim of an ‘exploration’ falls, and what we are left with is a body of teaching and a course of action which people must either accept or reject - a much more limited form of adult education. It could be regarded as a (rather narrow) form of Christian education rather than religious education in that it attempts to develop in its students an acceptance of Christian teaching. Amongst those interviewed, any who had serious issues to raise tended to leave in frustration.

The particular form of Christianity being offered in this way is Charismatic Evangelicalism. Nicky Gumbel clearly wishes *Alpha* to be seen as mainstream Christianity yet, despite his plea for a global perspective, it is evidently seen by many as having a Charismatic Evangelical bias. This emphasis on the ‘gifts of the spirit’, particularly speaking in tongues, means that for many clergy in particular this imbalance has to be redressed if the course is to be usable for either educational or evangelistic purposes. For Gumbel, this understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit is one of the Christian ‘basics’ which *Alpha* claims to offer, but Gumbel does not make clear who has selected these ‘basics’ or why these have been selected and not others. In the church, whoever controls doctrine wields power. *Alpha* offers little opportunity for real theological engagement with different views; rather dissent is crushed under the weight of large numbers of courses, converts, and endorsements from church leaders. Gumbel claims that *Alpha* contains only those things upon which all Christians are agreed and protects those basics with copyright restrictions so that no-one can change what he regards as a presentation of mainstream Christianity.
Yet if Alpha really did contain only those things upon which all Christians were agreed then there would be no need to protect them by copyright because the mainstream churches would be happy with the whole package as it stands, glossolalia included, and would have no wish to alter it. This is evidently not the case. Gumbel allows certain groups, most notably Roman Catholics, to add on their own teaching, but the core teaching in the talks must remain unchallenged. When any challenge to core teaching is ruled out in this way, then it must be doubted whether genuine education, rather than mere instruction, is taking place. Whatever else Alpha may be offering, it could not then claim to be a true ‘exploration’. The fact that the way Alpha is presented locally is also protected must also cast doubt upon the priority of substance over style. It implies that what is on offer is a package rather than an exploration.

Its educational claim to be offering an opportunity to explore the meaning of life was seen as only really applicable within the context of existing Christian faith. One interviewee who had no experience of Alpha nevertheless perceived the difficulty in combining both education and evangelism: “People will either believe a religion or they won’t.... You can explain the fundamentals of religion but you can’t make them believe it.... All you can do is say that’s the only one, or you’ve got to look at the whole lot.” Clearly Alpha has opted for the ‘only one’ approach, thus compromising its ‘exploration’ claim. When it was pointed out to this interviewee that Alpha, though claiming to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, contained at its heart a presentation of Christianity, she said she would regard this as a ‘con’ and that “if it’s going to be Christian, it should say it’s going to be Christian.” Thus Alpha could be perceived as engaging in a little dishonesty in its advertising pitch. It seems, however, that very few are taken in.

Of the four Alpha graduates located through the adult education centre (see Chapter Eight), the one who described herself as an atheist should have been fertile ground for Alpha. However, the sense of isolation and pressure she experienced on the course again suggest a lack of appeal to those right outside the church, even those genuinely searching for meaning in their lives. This essentially limited, internal appeal was reinforced by the two of those four who enjoyed the course because of the friendly church company and the reaffirmation of their existing beliefs, even though one pointed out that her questions were not really answered. This churchiness in turn meant that the fourth person - not a churchgoer, though with a church background - found the course rather exclusive and unsatisfying. Again, these four point towards Alpha as essentially an internal church course with no great appeal to those outside.

It was also noted in Chapter Two that Alpha has adapted itself to, and utilised many facets of contemporary culture. Its use of information and communication technology, its informal, relaxed and humorous approach, its ‘conference’ rather than ecclesiastical style have clearly struck a chord with sections of the community. It is quite open about its appeal to those looking for an ‘experience’ as well as straightforward teaching. It has also attempted to engage with the musical tastes of its target clientele (particularly at HTB) and the social habits of those who enjoy an evening meal out with friends. A great deal of market research has clearly gone into
the production of Alpha and no doubt it will continue to adapt to changing fashions as long as it has the energy and resources to do so. However, some claim that there is a triumph of style over content, or that the medium is too close to being the message (see Ward, 1998) - that the pursuit of truth is being sacrificed for simplicity and that rigour, challenge and mystery are being ignored in the quest for popular appeal. An entertaining speaker, a comforting message, and the possibility of a miraculous healing may win passing popularity for the course, but by accommodating itself too much to a consumer society, Alpha may have lost the sense of the transcendent (see Baudrillard, 1970, p.192) and substituted an immediate but passing experience.

The closed-ended nature of Alpha in the context of publicity which claims to offer an ‘exploration’ is again a matter of concern. As pointed out, the talks, which are the central part of the course, themselves are not open to challenge, but Alpha’s claim is that the discussion groups which follow on from the talks provide a forum for debate in which participants can express any view they wish. However, the Alpha literature makes it clear that each group has to be managed in such a way as to ensure that it reaches the “right conclusion” which people should then be persuaded to accept (Gumbel, 1994a, p.103) because Alpha has the one and only “objective” truth (Gumbel, 1994a, p.122). This is Christian education of a very didactic kind.

The archdeacon and bishop interviewed differed in their assessment of whether or not Alpha offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Ironically, the archdeacon, though coming from the Evangelical tradition, thought the course was too rigid, while the bishop, coming from a more catholic perspective within the Church of England, thought it was a fair claim, while conceding that the exploration was within a Christian context. He saw the course as giving people a faith which then equipped them to tackle the question. However, as pointed out in Chapter Eight, while Evangelical Christians may see this as a legitimate way to proceed, it means that there can never be a real dialogue concerning these ultimate questions between those inside the church (or, at least, those inside Alpha) and those outside. Without such a dialogue, no real exploration, and hence no real adult religious education can take place, only a rather limited form of Christian education which all but the already committed are likely to find unacceptable.

Pete Ward, the academic, took a similar view to the bishop, though he also saw the dilemma between wanting to present Christian faith rather than any other view, but not wanting to be too ‘imperialistic’ about it. As an academic working in a secular university, and at the same time being an Evangelical Christian, Ward embodies this tension the Church faces in wanting both to educate and evangelise. As a tool for evangelism, Ward believes that if Alpha is bringing anyone to faith at all it must be a good thing. But this does not recognise any possible harm that Alpha may be doing to the Church. If Alpha is claiming that it is offering universal Christianity (“the things upon which we are all agreed” - Gumbel, 1998) rather than just one version of it, those who reject it at first sight, are alienated by the Holy Spirit Weekend, or who go along with it for a while and then drop out, may believe they are rejecting the whole of Christianity without any awareness of its many and diverse forms, of which Alpha
is just one. In leaving people ignorant of the diversity of Christianity, it has failed educationally as well as evangelistically.

Gumbel himself clearly wishes Alpha to be regarded as orthodox and mainstream, hence the multitude of endorsements from church leaders (though mostly of Evangelical persuasion) and his desire to distance it from the Toronto Blessing. But the version of Christianity being propagated offers no sense of mystery, no transcendence, no openness, nothing about the transformation of society, nor of the Christian’s calling to be salt and light in the world. Faith has suddenly to become real at a moment of decision in a pressured environment rather than emerge and grow through a lifetime of discovery. Again there is a narrowness of understanding here claiming to be both the only authentic way of being a Christian, and an exploration of the meaning of life. Neither claim appears to be credible. This narrowness and inflexibility cast doubt both on Alpha’s explicit educational claim and its mainstream Christian aspirations. Alpha cannot be altered - except in peripherals - for the local situation. One has to swallow it whole as the definitive version of Christianity, or leave it alone. Its universal claims and desire to be seen as mainstream, combined with its narrow understanding of what it is to be a Christian (including the arbitrary choice of ‘basics’) and its tight control from HTB, worries many. There appears to be an unwillingness to engage with other understandings of what it is to be a Christian, and a similar unwillingness to engage with the real questions which concern people, such as those raised on the questionnaires.

The question of the relationship between Alpha and postmodernity remains. The sociologist Stephen Hunt sees a postmodern context as being advantageous for Alpha because of the openness to the idea of, and experience of the supernatural. On the other hand, Alpha could be seen as offering simple certainties of belief and a retreat from the uncertainties of a cold and cynical world. Undoubtedly Alpha offers a warm and welcoming community to people who are in need of it and who are willing to adopt the required world-view. Bauman (1993) and Fromm (1942), (see Chapter Two) describe the desire for and power of group allegiance, the need to ‘belong’ and the possible innate desire for submission to a leader. The desire to retreat from isolation and bewilderment is powerful. But for those who wish to be part of the Alpha community, an act of commitment is required sooner or later if one is to enjoy the supportive benefits which membership of this community brings. Each Alpha session ends with a prayer which people may pray if they feel willing to make this commitment, and they really need to have taken that step if they are to stay with the course from the Holy Spirit Weekend onwards. This act of commitment (consolidated usually by telling someone else, after which it becomes difficult to withdraw) is common currency in all churches of a strongly Evangelical tradition. However, it closes down the possibility of further exploration for those unwilling to make such a commitment, and moves decisively away from any remaining educational aspirations which that original claim implies. It is also at odds with the generally tolerant ethos of the Church of England whose educational sympathies usually make it open to enquirers to pursue their explorations without requiring of them a personal affirmation of conversion.
The dilemma, then, posed by the church’s dual task of engaging in both education and evangelism is addressed in *Alpha* by making educational claims and using educational language but actually offering recruitment to *Alpha’s* version of Christianity, largely within the existing church. Its public educational claim (‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’) appears only to be fulfilled for those already committed. It confirms what they already believe or inducts them into another form of church (Charismatic Evangelical). It claims to offer an ‘exploration’, but actually offers a take-it-or-leave-it package. Those outside the church, for whom *Alpha* is intended, appear on the whole to be leaving it.

This thesis started out by noting the historical links between the church and the development of education in the United Kingdom. Despite the gradual separation of education from ecclesiastical influence, the church has continued to utilize educational institutions, in particular for its training, and maintained some influence over education, as in its church schools and colleges. Indeed, it could be said to see itself as an educational institution, offering courses of various kinds, and has attempted to keep abreast of and adopt best educational practice as this has developed over the years. The *Alpha* Course presents itself to those outside the church as being in that same educational tradition. As well as describing itself as a ‘course’, a term recognizable to all at a time when courses of many kinds abound, it also claims to offer ‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life’, an apparently open-ended curriculum in the well-established liberal tradition of education. This thesis has tested that claim against the reality experienced by individuals in two Church of England deaneries, and has found it wanting.

In summary then, with regard to the question: *Does Alpha, as it claims, provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?* it will be noted that the present research demonstrated that, within the sample, this claim was only met insofar as the subjects already shared the particular faith which *Alpha* seeks to propagate - and then only for some. More significantly, for those outside this constituency, and particularly for those right outside the church, i.e. those whom *Alpha* wishes to reach, the claim was not met. Given the closed-endedness and overtly Christian nature of the syllabus, this is not particularly surprising. It may reasonably be surmised that the purpose of the slogan prominent on the *Alpha* posters and other publicity (An opportunity to explore the meaning of life) is intended to attract those outside the church with a view to inducting them into the *Alpha* regime rather than offering an open-ended exploratory educational experience as the slogan suggests. The evidence of the present research is that it is failing to attract such people and failing to offer the promised exploration. Rather it is offering a Charismatic Evangelical version of Christianity to those already involved in or sympathetic to the Church, with the level of Charismatic experience adjusted (contrary to the wishes of Alpha’s creators and defenders) according to the inclinations of those running the local course. Its primary function, then, is not educational, but rather to enlarge the Charismatic Evangelical constituency within the existing Church. Hence, on the evidence of the present research, the claim falls.

It is evident that when the Church attempts to combine both its educational and evangelistic roles it may end up offering a form of education which lacks credibility.
because of its narrowly defined intended outcome. If it is to offer education which might be of interest to those outside its immediate constituency then courage is needed to offer a learning experience which puts the pursuit of truth above its own immediate interests. However, the credibility issue runs deep. People appear to see any course put on by the Church as a ‘Church thing’ and therefore of limited interest to those outside. Those within the Church who wish to display their wares to those outside might also wish to consider carefully whether the content of Alpha fairly represents the breadth, depth and height of all that Christianity has to offer in its many and varied forms. Alpha appears to be offering a set of clear answers to questions which most people simply are not asking. A warm, welcoming and carefully controlled environment is being substituted for a genuine learning experience. Those churches which wish to use Alpha but do not share the Charismatic Evangelical presuppositions may find they have a high price to pay in terms of their integrity, either by compromising their theological stance or substantially (but illegitimately) altering the course in significant ways.

However, the validity of these conclusions, and hence of the implications and recommendations, depends on the validity of the research. The research was of a qualitative, grounded and critical nature, utilizing multiple case studies, hence the strengths and weaknesses inherent in this type of research were evident from the beginning, while other strengths and weaknesses specific to this particular project emerged in the course of the research process. The fieldwork took place amongst students attending an adult education centre, amongst the clergy and Alpha graduates of two Anglican deaneries, and included interviews with an academic, two senior clerics and the founder of Alpha. As such, the research was localised and did not have the breadth characteristic of quantitative research and it would be unwise to generalize too readily from the data obtained. The open-ended nature of the questions both on the questionnaires and in the interviews also meant that answers lacked the precision that, for example, multiple-choice responses would have given. However, the interviews gave a voice to individuals who recounted and interpreted their experiences in some depth, and there is no reason to suppose that similar stories would not be found elsewhere. Within the geographical limitations, the sample included parishes with a variety of ecclesiastical traditions within both affluent and less well off, and urban and suburban contexts. The methods used have produced rich data from individuals with direct experience of Alpha, and such data should be taken seriously because there may well be clues as to what is going on more widely. The literature examined in this thesis has illuminated the methods used by Alpha, and the Alpha literature itself, both that which gives instructions for running the course and that which describes the theology and content of it, has proved consistent with the reports given by those who have experienced the course in practice.

This research has produced hints, pointers and suggestions that all is not quite as it seems with this remarkable phenomenon, that the claimed ‘exploration’ is only really valid in a very limited sense and that impressionistic reports and published Alpha literature should be treated with caution. Although it would be inappropriate to claim too much or to make generalisations too readily from the present research, nevertheless the variety of interviews with people of different types of Christian
conviction or none, and the variety of churches with different ecclesiological traditions situated in different social environments were strengths of the research, as was the inclusion of interviews with church leaders, an academic with knowledge of Alpha, and the founder of Alpha himself. The in-depth semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for individuals with experience of Alpha to share those experiences and how they thought and felt about them rather than have assumptions made from the outside, and provided a considerable amount of relevant data.

The questionnaires achieved their function of specifying those issues which a group of people whom Alpha might target would like raised by a course making Alpha's claim. They also provided people for interview. However, the requests for information regarding gender and age proved unnecessary and could have been omitted. This research attempted to discover what the phrase, 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life', might mean to the kinds of people Alpha claims to be targeting (hence the questionnaires and interviews conducted with students from an adult education centre) and then moved on to interview clergy and lay people with direct experience of Alpha, to see if, in their experience, such an opportunity was indeed provided or, if it was not, what was actually being provided in the name of such an exploration. As such, the present research has provided some clues as to what may be going on more widely, highlighted some causes for concern and challenged some assumptions.

As suggested above and in Chapter One, Alpha's offer of an apparently educational course raises issues of the relationship between education, evangelism and indoctrination. To explore this issue further it would be necessary to begin with a thorough discussion of precisely what is meant by education, how it differs from indoctrination, and whether or not it can legitimately be associated with evangelism. This is a live issue for a Church which purports to have an educational role as well as an evangelistic one. This might be a fruitful area for further research. Also, as the present research progressed, it became clear that further research specifically into Alpha might be undertaken, beyond the remit of the present thesis. For example, given the divisive nature of the Holy Spirit Weekend, and the concern expressed by some about the long-term effects on vulnerable people of the Ministry Time in particular, this is an area which might bear closer examination, probably by means of case studies of such people. Related to this, given that some seem to dislike Alpha with the same degree of vigour that others commend it, and the general degree to which Alpha appears to engage the emotions, particularly at the Holy Spirit Weekend, the link between Alpha and personality types may well be another area of research worth pursuing, perhaps by utilizing psychological tests. Also, many voiced their feelings that Alpha seemed to appeal to particular social groups or particular age groups. The link between Alpha more widely and the social background of its adherents might be another area for further research, to assess whether this is a particularly culture-bound version of Christianity which is being offered. As far as age is concerned, Alpha wants to appeal in particular to the young and believes it is doing so. A key question for research might be: 'Does Alpha simply reflect the ages of the people who make up the church which is running it, or does Alpha actually have an influence on the age of the church's congregation?' Given Alpha's universal
claims, these may also be areas worth exploring. There have been a few examples of Alpha 'drop-outs' interviewed in the course of this research, but they have been discovered largely incidentally. Locating and interviewing those who have experience of Alpha but have found it unsatisfactory and left the course never to return might also be a fruitful area to take further. So far it is largely the success stories which have been recorded. Success is also claimed for Alpha's work in prisons, but as yet there has been no serious testing of this claim which might involve interviewing prisoners themselves, or examining any long-term effect that Alpha-conversion has on them. In this area and more widely, there still remains little real external evaluation of Alpha. This thesis is a contribution.
APPENDIX 1 The Questionnaire

University of Surrey

School of Educational Studies

QUESTIONNAIRE

Have you attended church more than twice during the previous year, not counting baptisms, weddings, funerals and school services?

Have you attended any course looking at religious belief in the last six years? If so, what was the title of the course or its main focus of study?

If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like discussed under that heading, what would they be?

i

ii

iii

iv

v

Gender: male ☐ female ☐

Age range: 16-19 ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ 60+ ☐ (please tick)

I hope to discuss these questions and answers further with some respondents. If you are willing to be interviewed at some mutually convenient place and time, please write your name and contact telephone number below.

Many thanks for your time.

Name: Contact Number:
APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions

(i) Adult Education Centre

(a) Non-Alpha

It would be most helpful if you could tell me a little about your own background, particularly with regard to any contact you might have had with religion, even if only tangentially. So, for example, Sunday School, Brownies, School, that kind of thing. A little bit of autobiography would be quite helpful.


Do you have any kind of motivating philosophy apart from just day-to-day getting on with life? Anything that influences the way you behave - the way you live?

The questionnaire asked: If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like explored under that heading, what would they be? You wrote....... Could you say a little more about that?

What other areas would you like to see explored under that heading?

Would you expect such a course to look at different religions, or one particular religion, or do you think it ought to keep religion out of it?

If such a course were put on and you went along to it, and when you got there you found it was presenting Christianity and nothing else, what would you think about that?
(b) Alpha Graduates

It would be most helpful if you could tell me a little about your own background, particularly with regard to any contact you might have had with religion, even if only tangentially. So, for example, Sunday School, Brownies, School, that kind of thing. A little bit of autobiography would be quite helpful.


Do you have any kind of motivating philosophy apart from just day-to-day getting on with life? Anything that influences the way you behave - the way you live?

The questionnaire asked: *If you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, and you could submit five questions which you would like explored under that heading, what would they be?* You wrote........ Could you say a little more about that?

What other areas would you like to see explored under that heading?

Now can we move on to this Alpha course that you’ve been on? How did you come to go on this course in the first place?

Did it deal with any of the questions you have raised?

Were you happy with the course?

Were the people there churchgoers or non-churchgoers?

Have you any ideas about how this course could be improved?

Will you be doing it again?
(ii) Clergy

What experience do you have of *Alpha*? Have you ever run an *Alpha* course?

What are your thoughts about *Alpha* courses? Strengths and weaknesses?

In your experience, how effective has *Alpha* been?

Does it address the questions that ordinary people are asking?

How would you account for the apparent numerical success of *Alpha*?

*Alpha* claims to offer 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.' Do you think it lives up to that claim?

What sort of topics would you want to see covered in a course designed to introduce the unchurched to Christianity?

What do you think is the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith?

How do you think evangelism works best?

Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Do you see any difference between religious questions and Christian questions? Which should the church be involved in?

How important do you think numerical growth should be in the church?

Could you give me the contact details of some people who attended your *Alpha* course and who might be willing to be interviewed?
(iii)  *Alpha* Graduates

Tell me a little about your own background as far as the church is concerned - e.g., Brownies / Cubs, Sunday School, School, Youth Club, Parents etc. Were you a churchgoer before you did the *Alpha* course?

How did you come to go on the *Alpha* course in the first place?

What was your first impression when you turned up? Were there others there like you? What did you make of the people you met? What sort of proportions were churchgoers and non-churchgoers?

What did you make of the talks? Did you find the speaker / video persuasive?

How did you find the group discussions? What sort of questions came up?

Have you been on the Holy Spirit Day / Weekend? What did you think of it?

Did you go into the course with questions you wanted answered? If so, were they answered?

Were any of the following issues raised?

*Life after death*
*Why are we here?*
*The problem of suffering*
*Many religions*
*Religion and science*
*Existence of God*

The *Alpha* course claims to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you think it succeeds in doing that?

What sort of people do you think *Alpha* works best with? Who do you think it is unlikely to work with?

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of *Alpha*?

What is your overall impression of *Alpha*?
(iv) Senior Clergy - Archdeacon and Bishop

What experience do you have of *Alpha*, direct or indirect? For example, have you been asked to give any of the talks at a course or be involved in some way? Have you been asked to endorse it or encourage it or promote it? Have you seen direct evidence of its fruits? Have people expressed their views to you about it - good or bad?

What are your thoughts about *Alpha* courses? Strengths and weaknesses?

In your experience, how effective has *Alpha* been?

Does it address the questions that ordinary people are asking?

How would you account for the apparent numerical success of *Alpha*?

*Alpha* claims to offer ‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.’ Do you think it lives up to that claim?

What sort of topics would you want to see covered in a course designed to introduce the unchurched to Christianity?

What do you think is the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith?

How do you think evangelism works best?

Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Do you see any difference between religious questions and Christian questions? Which should the church be involved in?

How important do you think numerical growth should be in the church?
What experience do you have of Alpha?

Alpha claims to offer ‘an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.’ Do you think it lives up to that claim?

Nicky Gumbel, when he’s speaking to journalists, will sometimes say of Alpha: “These are the things upon which we are all agreed.” How true do you think that is?

What do you think the purpose of Alpha is?

How effective do you think it is?

Does it address the questions that ordinary people are asking?

How would you account for the apparent numerical success of Alpha?

The crisis point for people who do the course, and the most controversial part of Alpha seems to be the Holy Spirit Weekend or Day away. Do you have any thoughts about that?

You wrote a critical piece about Alpha in Anvil two years ago, extracts from which were published in the Church Times and attracted a flurry of correspondence. What sort of response did that article provoke for you personally - letters, phone calls etc.?

In your article you do counterbalance your criticism by restating that ‘God is at work in Alpha.’ I’d like to ask you what you mean by that, and to sharpen up the question I’d like to quote one short extract from one letter of criticism that appeared in the Church Times criticizing you for not going far enough: His weak claim that God is supposed to be at work is never substantiated: that thousands of Alpha courses go on is no proof that anyone is being saved, any more than the fact that thousands of slimming courses are held is proof that people are actually losing weight.

What sort of topics would you want to see covered in any course designed to introduce the unchurched to Christianity?

What do you think is the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith? How do you think evangelism works best?

Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Do you see any difference between religious questions and Christian questions? If so, which should the Church be involved in?

How important do you think numerical growth should be in the church?
Could you say a little about your own early exposure to religion, perhaps through your parents or some other influence?

Do you feel that early experience has in any way influenced your present faith?

I know that you inherited a course from your predecessor, but it’s obviously undergone a considerable development since then. I wonder how you developed the methods that you use: the meal, the talk, the weekend away. Did you borrow ideas from somewhere else? Other sources?

In Searching Issues you have addressed some of the issues that tend to come up in the group discussions. Do you have any plans to integrate any of that material into the talks themselves?

From time to time there have been revival movements in the church. Billy Graham, Moody and Sankey and so on. Would you say that you have learnt from those? Is Alpha in that tradition or is it something different?

I would like to ask you about the relationship between Alpha and the church, and the impact that Alpha is having on the wider church. Do you think that the church needs to change the way it sees its mission?

What would you say are the main strengths and weaknesses of Alpha?

Do you see Alpha as a timely response to postmodernism?

Do you think that the church has an educational task to perform as well as an evangelistic one, and if it does, do you see Alpha as being a tool for that?

Inevitably, something as successful as Alpha is bound to attract occasional criticism, not least in the pages of the Church Times. I wonder if I could mention a couple of criticisms to you, one from Pete Ward and the other from Martyn Percy. Pete Ward famously compared Alpha with McDonald’s and he suggested that though the packaging and the marketing are excellent, that the product is a bit flat, uniform and bland. How do you respond to that?

Martyn Percy thought that the teaching about the Holy Spirit seemed to be entirely concerned with the individual and ignored ‘the spirit’s work in creation, justice, peace, reconciliation and the wider church.’ How would you respond to that?

How do you feel about criticisms of Alpha? Do they bother you?

Some see the Holy Spirit Weekend and the teaching associated with it as marking Alpha out as clearly belonging to the charismatic Evangelical wing of the church.
Given that the breadth of Alpha is important to you, I notice you stick with that. Could you say why?

Does the form of the weekend away, the teaching, the time of ministry and so on, have any link with what used to be known as the Toronto Blessing? Do you see any similarities?

You’ve explained the reason for the Alpha copyright: to make sure that no matter where you get it, it’s always the same. You also say that it’s important that it’s used by the local church. If you bear in mind that local churches are all slightly different - they all have their own emphases - and occasionally they will ask you: ‘Can we adapt this bit or that bit?’ and the answer is no, for the reasons that you’ve given, then there is a problem. It appears that Alpha is using the local church, rather than the local church being able to use Alpha in the way it thinks best?

Do you think that any of those who do the course (who would have thought of themselves as Christian before they did the course) come to the conclusion during the course that they weren’t a proper Christian before, but then by the end of the course they are?

One of Stephen Hunt’s criticisms is that he thinks Alpha basically recycles Christians. In other words they were churchgoers and would have called themselves Christians, and when they say ‘I became a Christian on the course’, what they actually mean is they have come to a deeper commitment. What do you think about that?
Appendix 3

Sample Interview Transcripts

(i) Adult Education Centre (Non-Alpha)

This interviewee was a (slightly lapsed) churchgoer who had not done Alpha. On her questionnaire she was particularly concerned about the place of suffering and whether it served any purpose.

SB
I'm quite interested in the way people's background and upbringing and so on influences how they think about questions like the meaning of life. So it would be quite useful if to begin with you could say a little bit about your background with regard to contact with religion - say Sunday School, Brownies, Guides, school, parents, that kind of thing.

S24
You could say I was conventionally christened. I was christened in a Church of England. Where we lived was up north in Darlington which is of course a largish town now, but in the time that we lived there we lived on the outskirts of Darlington. Where we went to Sunday School was very much governed by the district, and the first place that I could go to was actually Quaker Sunday School. But unfortunately I had quite a bit of illness when I was quite young and so I didn't go there on any regular basis, it was just when I could; and I can't really remember it but it had a nice atmosphere and I remember getting... we had a stamp book and they were filled in by the teachers and it was just a square of brightly coloured sticky paper with a text on. (interrupted by telephone).

I'd better not ramble too much had I, but it's funny the things you remember, and I've still got that stamp book, and there was one stamp in particular. It was bright green and it had a picture of lilies of the valley. I can't actually remember the text that was on it. I'd have to go and look at it again, but that drawing just stood out in my mind. I have no idea why. Anyway, that is rambling.

We moved to Middlesbrough when I was six, and again it was a long way to go to church or Sunday School and so again we were governed by the nearest one, but I can't tell you anything about that one except that we had to go over fields for the shortest way.

When we moved again I did attend a Methodist church and Sunday School with all the attendant anniversaries. They tended to have big anniversaries - the whole Sunday School doing a display, and we did Scripture Union bible story exams. I did quite enjoy those - I think possibly because it was a large group. I was an only kid and so possibly friends - I'm not quite sure, it's so long ago now.

But we then moved into a flat, and in the top floor of this flat was a lady and gentleman called Mr and Mrs Thomas. They belonged to the Church of England. My parents had a shop and worked very long hours - terrifically long hours - and Mr & Mrs Thomas looked after me on Friday evening when things were particularly late. Mrs Thomas used to worship at the Church of England school on the green which was very picturesque indeed. It was a Norman church and she took me along one
Christmas just to have a look at the crib because the Methodists didn’t have a crib. I think they do now but they didn’t then. Right, well, I was very impressionable at that age. The church was absolutely beautiful and I was just beginning to be very interested in history and of course that aspect fascinated me, plus the fact they had a very good vicar, and very approachable and this, and the other, and so, off my own bat, I started to go there, and eventually I became confirmed and did worship there reasonably regularly.

I have to be honest; I cannot remember what I believed at that stage. I couldn’t tell you whether I believed it implicitly or not. I think, to be perfectly honest, I was probably more in love with the music and the words and everything at that time.

When I got married, I was actually married at that church, came down here and we eventually came here. We didn’t go to church while we were in London. We came here and sort of started at the local church here. We had a very nice vicar, very broad-minded. What I liked about him very much was, my husband is an atheist anyway but he didn’t care. He said to my husband, If you want to come, you can come up the altar rail or sit where you are. He was very nice. Very sadly, after that we got somebody who was very much a hellfire and brimstone man, and he really put us off, and at that time unfortunately we had a lot of problems here. My youngest daughter had an awful lot of illness and unfortunately still does. And we had my parents living with us. My mother is still with us. My father died last year. They had been down here for twenty-six years. Its a long time. It involved an awful lot of responsibility and in the end I just couldn’t get there. It was just impossible. Again that was Church of England. It was not true to St **** in *****. Now I’m not going because since my father died last year I’ve been looking after my mother, and I also have my daughter who - sadly - she has ME - I don’t know how much you know about ME.

SB
I’ve heard a little bit about it.

S24
Well, it’s a very insidious thing and she’s had it since she was fourteen. She recovered - she seemed to be in remission for two years, and she was just starting her career at Durham last year - last September - and sadly it came back, and because she’s back at home now... so I’ve got two people in a way. If you saw her you’d think she looked fragile but you wouldn’t think she was particularly ill, but nevertheless it is quite time-consuming in many ways and so I must admit I’m absolutely shattered sometimes, so I don’t get there.

When I did manage to get there I used to like going to the quieter service at eight o’clock in the morning simply because in half an hour you could have said the service and had time for a bit of peace and quiet and a time to think, and then you could come home. Whereas I think churches these days tend to have coffee afterwards (I’m not criticizing - it’s a good thing for people who would like to do that and who need friends and things like that) whereas if you have commitments and responsibilities, I just cannot afford two hours, three hours in the morning. It’s impossible - if you’re cooking the lunch for somebody. So really, I think that’s all I’ve got to say. My family - if it’s of any relevance - they don’t really... they’re certainly
spiritual, but they’re certainly not Christian. They behave with Christian principles, but that’s how it is.

SB
I think you’ve probably answered my next question, which is, Would you describe yourself as a Christian these days, or agnostic or...?

S24
No, I don’t think so. I’m not.

SB
How would you describe yourself?

S24
I don’t know. The more I go on, the less I know, I think. The less sure I am, which sounds a pretty pathetic state of affairs. I’m still... as I think I become increasingly aware, and it’s not criticisms. The church.... it’s so narrow in many ways, in that I know there’s a lot more tolerance of things now, but Christians seem to say, God will take care of you - this that and the other, and only for the everlasting arms. That’s lovely but how do you... God is no more there for me than for the Indian baby dumped on a rubbish dump in Calcutta. Or people in Kosovo. I mean problems here in our civilisation - when I think of my problems here (people say, Oh you’ve got an awful lot on) but when you think of other people - our problems - I mean we’ve got a roof over our heads - that’s it. Other people haven’t. How do you say anything to them? That’s exactly where I am, sort of thing. It doesn’t bother me unduly because you just have to accept it. You get nowhere by tearing yourself apart over that.

SB
Do you ever contemplate whether life has any meaning beyond day to day just getting on with things?

S24
Oh yes, all the time I think you do that. All the time. I mean you couldn’t possibly avoid it with what goes on during the day, can you? That just comes all the time.

SB
Do you have any philosophy of life that motivates you?

S24
I think so. It sounds a bit corny really. It’s just simply - I don’t know - just love I suppose. That’s all that matters - you know - really.

SB
I’m going to ask you about what you wrote about suffering - about the place of suffering and whether it serves any purpose. I was going to ask you whether you have any thoughts about that yourself.
No. I do not see the point in terrible suffering

(*doorbell - the hairdresser*)

Where were we?

You were telling me that love is the main motivating force behind life

Yes, actually, thinking about it, I suppose my daughter’s illness.... that really hammers it home because with something like this that is incurable at the present time, you do not know what’s going to happen. Everything else becomes quite petty, because if she could just be well again, that’s the main thing, and I no longer care about what she is or what she does. It does, it forces you to think that way, and so therefore all this hassle that you get - it all seems irrelevant sometimes day-to-day. I suppose really you’ve got to be very careful that you don’t fall into a trap because illness can make you like that can’t it - very introspective I suppose - but, I don’t know, I do think people want time an awful lot. It grieves me when I see families split up and things like that; and quarrels within families that really - just for want of - just for a little bit more love or whatever you care to.... it just shouldn’t be. Human beings waste an awful lot of time on things like that I suppose.

On the questionnaire, the way I put it was that if you were to attend a course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life and you could submit some questions which you would like discussed under that heading, what would they be? And you put this one, so if such a course were to have any relevance for you, am I right in thinking you would expect it to address problems like suffering, like the one you’ve just mentioned?

Well, you can’t address it because there isn’t an answer, is there? You can listen to people and its always very helpful to hear other people, but there isn’t an answer, really. I suppose this is where a lot of people would say faith comes in. But I don’t have faith like that. I couldn’t define really what I feel or believe. I just sort of.... well at the moment.... unless there’s some blinding flash of light happens.... I don’t know; you’ve just got to plod on really. That’s all.

The purpose of suffering in life - going back to that - it does teach people things - a certain kind of suffering. It doesn’t do anybody any harm to have to strive after things, and make big efforts. But real suffering.... for instance, I’ve done some work in nursing homes and things like that..... no, there is no point in suffering, not like some people do go through it, none whatsoever, and certainly not for the person concerned, nor the people, the relatives who look after them or visit them or things like that. I don’t mean that life has to be all sugary - not that - but all this business
about it making you a better person - it does for some people, but that shouldn’t really
be necessary, I don’t think. That equates to God saying, Oh you’re not doing so well,
don’t you think it’s time you had a bit of a struggle over the pain? Its silly.

SB
Do you think other people would share your thoughts about suffering?

S24
I don’t know. Probably some would agree, some would probably think I’m a bit too
much hitting the nail on the head.

SB
If such a course were put on, and it was a course which offered an opportunity to
explore the meaning of life, and you went along to such a course as that, do you think
that such a course ought to look at a number of different religions, or should it look at
one religion, or should it just keep religion out of it completely?

S24
Can you do that? Can you keep religion out of it? I don’t know. I would think that
would be very difficult. I think you should have several religions... all, well, as many
religions as you like.

SB
So you would expect it to look at a number of different religious perspectives.

S24
Yes. Oh yes.

SB
If you went along to this theoretical course and when you got there you found that the
sole focus was Christianity, how would you feel about that? How would you react to
that?

S24
Suffering is common to everybody, isn’t it? So it couldn’t just focus.... that wouldn’t
work would it?

SB
But you went to this course, and that’s what you discovered. It focused purely on
Christianity.

S24
It was just totally on Christian belief?

SB
Yes. A course which claimed to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.
When you got there you found it was just about Christianity.
No. That would be arrogant, again, I think, on the part of Christianity - to think that they had all the answers. You need to have as wide a perspective as possible.

There is a thing going around at the moment called the *Alpha* course.

I have heard of it. I haven’t been to it.

But you’re aware of it.

I’m not quite sure what it means, to tell you the truth. No, I’ve forgotten.

We’ve tackled much of what I wanted to look at. This whole business of suffering was one issue that you put down and that’s clearly one that does occupy your thoughts. Are there any other issues which you would submit to be dealt with on this theoretical course? Are there any other issues which you think are important enough to be discussed under that heading?

Right now I can’t think of anything. No, not really. I suppose really..... Do you mean in a particular sense..?

I’m talking about really the big questions if were reflecting on whether life has any meaning beyond just day-to-day activity. Some people would say we should discuss whether there’s a God at all. Any kind of deity at all. Some might ask why there is evil in the world. The big issues.

I think they’re all very closely tied together anyway, aren’t they. I can’t think of anything else, anyway.

That’s OK. So your current position is not Christian, but is not well-defined at the moment.

No.

OK. Well, thank you very much for that
S24
You're very welcome

SB
Very helpful.

S24
(Laughter) I don't often get... um... time to sit... well you don't think about it particularly, do you? You're just too busy most of the time. Sometimes in the middle of the night it crosses your mind, doesn't it, all these things?

SB
Yes.

S24,
I think, for example, my next-door neighbour, they're very... it sounds rude doesn't it... they're orthodox Christians, shall we say; very conventional Christians; and I think sometimes I have to be quite careful what I say. But they seem to have their answer for every occasion, but I think possibly, my situation, or my daughters situation, has made them think a bit. Really, it's as and when you come across it, isn't it really?

SB
It's quite interesting that you talked about a previous vicar who was very open and not particularly dogmatic about it, and to your way of thinking that is a more credible presentation of Christianity than anything...

S24
Oh, absolutely. Its a good psychological approach, isn't it? If people like the personality involved you're automatically attracted to him. Interestingly, he was an insurance salesman before he became a vicar, and I think possibly that's a jolly good idea - to work in something before you go into the church. I think it must be a fearfully difficult job, because there's always cliques and you're sort of doing a balancing act, and nowadays of course the big grumble with people is that you don't see the church on a day-to-day basis. You know, the vicar no longer calls. But of course, communities have grown so huge and I suppose the church is a bit like teaching and nursing and doctors; more paperwork has come into it, more committees, more this, that and the other. It must be an awful job to do. No wonder there's decline in it. I think its inevitable. I think anyone who's in it must be extremely brave.
(ii) Clergy

SB
Could you tell me a little bit about what experience you have had of Alpha?

BC2
When I arrived here four years ago I was put under a lot of pressure to run an Alpha course. We waited a year and a half and then, with an insistence that people in church did it first, we ran our first course which about forty-five people attended from the congregation mainly, and subsequent to that we have run four courses, two of which were into double figures. Two were much smaller numbers of people who had not been able to come to other courses. So that's spread over three years now. What we haven't found is that national advertising helps. It doesn't help at all, and regional advertising seems to make no impact in this area. The people who have come have always had some church contact. We've not had any interest from people outside the orbit of the church.

SB
What are your general thoughts about Alpha courses from what you know of them? Strengths and weaknesses?

BC2
I think the strength is actually not for new Christians. It's not a course I'd want to put people through who were just really exploring. The strength for us has been a reaffirmation and going back to explore some of the basics for people who thought they knew it. Having said that, I reinterpreted a lot of the material and added to it because I found there were weaknesses in the material, for example the sacramental stuff, church life. I wanted to expand things about the bible and prayer to encompass our wider set of traditions and positions. So whilst holding the basic programme, we made the exploration a bit deeper. I suppose implicit in that is a weakness that it's quite one-sided; but because we were willing to put the effort into changing it and re-working some of the stuff, we found it really useful. One of the weaknesses here was that, because it was a re-affirmation of where people were, it didn't actually result in great change. I suppose there was a disappointment in that, because we put a lot of effort into doing it for people. It didn't move people very much. It got one or two people thinking.

SB
How effective do you think it has been?

BC2
In terms of church growth numerically, not very. In fact, not at all. In terms of deepening some people's experience of God, it probably has done that, but over the longer term. It was an initial impetus. And within the teaching itself there was some significant change in some attitudes. One of the elements of the course we changed quite considerably was that on healing and wholeness, because we had some particular experience here in relation to me about that, and we were able to actually
widen that out, and a number of people in each of the courses found that a growth point in their understanding. I suppose that’s been more implicit than explicit growth - that there has been deepening faith.

SB
Would you say that *Alpha* addresses the questions that ordinary people are asking?

BC2
It may address them, but they are not questions which in this particular area seem very relevant to people. In a way they are more relevant to crisis points which may be why some appeal to younger people in particular life situations. The crisis points in this sort of area are very different, and the *Alpha* questions aren’t ones which people need to return to. It may be a matter of how they are presented as questions.

SB
Have you any thoughts or ideas about what sort of questions people really are asking, if *Alpha* isn’t really addressing them?

BC2
That depends how cynical I’m allowed to be! This is quite a comfortable area in many ways. People have enough and want to hold on to their security. One of the biggest barriers to the growth of faith is that holding on to security here and now. It’s how to open up that need for security so that people can have a wider picture. At the moment in this sort of area people have a very narrow picture which involves them having what they need and making sure they still have it. I think there’s an unwillingness generally to think about issues of life and death, and we’ve lost a sense of holiness and transcendence and what that might mean. So everything is racked back down to safe levels and people aren’t good at taking risks. The questions I ask from my point of view are: "How do we break that open?" I’m not sure how people themselves would begin to answer, or think of, questions in these ways. They haven’t yet got the language to ask those questions. Sometimes they come up at the point of death and the occasion will be surrounded. They feel safe, and that safety is very hard to rock. And if they don’t feel safe, the barriers come up so quickly that you’ve lost the chance.

SB
How would you account for the apparent numerical success of *Alpha*?

BC2
I think in the areas where it works, people are ready for it. They’re at points in their lives where those questions are relevant. Perhaps that is especially seen in the prison *Alpha* courses, and again, amongst certain groups of people in the inner cities. I know it has wider appeal that that. Part of the answer is that when it works people are actually beginning to ask those questions or want the answers to those questions. It may also be because in some other ways it answers those questions, it gives security, which may be both a strength and a weakness in that if it gives answers it stops people exploring more for their own. For some people perhaps it closes down and
makes things safe. For others it starts the questions off which in itself is challenging. Is that a contradiction? If people take it as a fundamental answer, it will bite back on itself in the end, and it will not work. So it’s not just about knowledge, it’s about insight.

SB
The claim of Alpha is that it provides an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you feel that it lives up to that claim?

BC2
Only in part. I think it has bounded the meaning of life within its own understanding of Christianity. I can’t help thinking of the meaning of life without Douglas Adams in mind. I wonder if the words themselves have much meaning for people. If people actually see the words, it’s such a solecism anyway and refuse it as the invitation. I think it explores its own understanding of the meaning of life within the confines of quite a safe Christianity.

SB
If you were designing a course to introduce the unchurched to Christianity, what sort of topics would you want to see covered in it?

BC2
Can I have a week’s notice of that question! For people who are coming in at an absolute entry level, I would want to start somewhere actually very different; not start straight in with the story of Jesus, or the good news of Jesus, or however you want to express it. I would want to begin by exploring with them something of themselves and of values and stuff. The question I use for students is: "Describe the Good News in three statements." I would want to have Good News that starts with: "I am, and that matters", "God is, and that matters", and "Things can change". The sense of themselves going into it. And moving on from there to the stories which matter, and relationships, and looking for different understandings of God, and relationships with God, to how people have already experienced God and the Word of God in their lives, and then begin to focus on the work of Jesus, on the work of the Holy Spirit. Coming at it from people’s present experience, and helping them talk about that.

SB
What do you think is the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith?

BC2
I think there is no one best way. So much depends on where the person is coming from, what they bring with them, and that in both terms of resistance and openness. For some people the best introduction is actually a theme, for another Christian prayer, having a change in life which that might bring, or there’s room to approach a much more cerebral belief. Some want to begin with their brain and work into their heart. Some work from their heart through to their brain. Perhaps it reflects learning styles as well. Quite seriously, the learning styles, personality type all affects your approach to faith and spirituality. Some people will start from a very strong
experience of something which they haven't yet named but may find it named in terms of religious experience. For me the most important thing is actually being open to the variety of ways in which people may come to this. Instead of giving them a received whole - a package which introduces you to faith - you begin from a number of different points.

SB
How do you think evangelism works best?

BC2
When it has the flexibility to engage with people at those many different levels. In this area it works best in a very personal context and contact. In others I think it works well as a faith in action. I think people are aware of people and what difference it makes to them.

SB
Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Or, to put it another way, is there any difference between religious questions and Christian questions?

BC2
I think that in the minds of many people there is a difference. Again, this locates my own bias. The people who are concerned with Christian education, in my mind are much more the Evangelical fundamentalist groups. They are not the same but they tend towards Christian education, when really religious education encompasses the Christian and gives scope for a wider exploration, not to devalue the Christian but to allow access to the church from many directions, and to allow access to the spiritual from many directions. And so the person who comes to explore the funny feeling they have when they are in touch with the things of creation may actually be exploring something deeply Christian. If allowed to explore it in the context of religious learning (I know I've changed the term) may actually be able to explore and begin an understanding of Trinity. But I think Christian education tries to force all people into the same shaped hole, sort of. Keep the hole fluid! That sounds very weak and wishy-washy, but I think as well it is that difference between learning and education. Education sometimes seems to be about the gathering of knowledge and having the right knowledge. Learning is engaged in the whole process of being, growth and development. The church shouldn't be involved with the gaining of knowledge, it should be involved in the processes of learning. All Christians should be learning in the deepest sense of the word, because that is about growth and development.

SB
What lay behind that question is that early on in this research I asked a number of "people in the street" who had no particular connection with any church or religious background, if they were to attend a course which claims to offer an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, what sort of things they would expect to be looked at on it. The kind of issues they raised are things like: suffering, often borne out of some experience of their own, "Why is there evil in the world?" "Is there a God at all?"
"What about all these other religions?" Those were the kind of issues that were raised - the big religious questions that transcend any religious denomination or faith. What Alpha seems to offer is something rather different from that - not so much exploring those big religious questions, but more internal Christian questions like: Who is Jesus?, Who is the Holy Spirit?, How do I pray?, and those kind of insider questions; and there seems to be a bit of a disjunctive between the two, which is why I was wondering if you saw a difference between these religious questions, and Christian questions. And should the church bother with the first one?

BC2
The church should be engaged in the big questions but not in the business of giving easy answers. And helping people to discover their own answers within their experience.

SB
Should the church be offering any distinctive contribution towards that discussion?

BC2
I think it could offer a distinctive approach of openness to questions, whilst remaining with integrity to its own source. Yes, we have a particular understanding of faith and approach to God and that is our distinctiveness. But to allow people to work alongside us...... and exploring that, their own questions and answers. My heart rebels against a church which provides the answer. I think that is actually death towards our humanness. It doesn’t seem to be fully of God. It denies part of what is human: questioning, seeking out and exploring. I’m not sure we’re made creatures who have satisfaction with easy answers. That fulfils a different, more negative need. I suppose I want to say that part of the church’s contribution should be an ability to listen and give people space to explore those questions.

SB
How important do you think numerical growth should be in the church?

BC2
It has its place. Again, I don’t believe it should be the be all and end all of statistics. The growth of the individual towards God, and of the community towards God and in God, to me is more important. I suppose a sign that the community is growing in various ways is that it attracts others. And so in that sense new outward growth follows. But if it’s just counting bums on pews and we’re successful because we’ve added x numbers, I think that can be very limiting because any institution can have large numbers if it offers the right carrots. But what is that doing to us in terms of growth and the real meaning of the institution?

SB
Any other thoughts about Alpha?
It's right for some places. It isn't God's gift to the world, although some of its publicity would suggest that it is.

Thank you.

(iii) Alpha Graduate (1)

BL10
I was brought up in a very traditional C of E home. My parents went to a C of E church. We went with them. We were expected to sit there and be good. I believe my mother was brought up Scottish Presbyterian but it terrified her so she changed to C of E. I went to church all of my childhood. I went to a day school which had a Christian assembly. I did Brownies but I don't remember that being Christian at all. As I got older - ten, eleven, twelve - I went into the choir in church because I was bored. I'm a good singer, but I was bored. The church services were exactly the same every week. No change at all, old hymns etc. I did like being in the choir, loved going round doing carol-singing, that kind of thing. I went to a boarding school at the age of twelve, where we had a long assembly every morning, not just a hymn and a prayer; a long assembly. Chapel on Thursdays was optional, and Sunday we went to church twice. I got Confirmed at the age of fourteen. Everybody did. The school was C of E. I got Confirmed because I was expected to. I suppose it's the only time I started thinking about it. I realised that I was so bored that I didn't believe it at all. We went on a retreat just before I got Confirmed and I said to the C of E priest: "I don't think I believe in God, should I get Confirmed?" And he said, "What happens if you don't get Confirmed." I said, "My parents will practically disown me". There wasn't a question of not believing. You just do. He said, "If your conscience isn't going to bother you, get Confirmed." So I got Confirmed. Having thought about it since, I was an agnostic verging on atheist. Probably nearer to atheist. I sometimes thought there might be something there, right up until recently. My oldest brother is very Christian. He was born again and all that when he was in his sixth form at school and university. I love him dearly and I never - although I used to laugh at him and call him God-squaddy, and all his friends were God-squaddies - I loved him and his friends. I stayed with him a lot because he was older than me and I was still at school, and I used to go to their funny church services that were held in halls and houses, not in a church. They'd clap and I'd just laugh and they never minded. They were lovely. So I thought that it was harmless but a bit daft. My middle brother is a complete atheist and my youngest brother doesn't mind. I carried on like that, sometimes wondering if there was something up there, maybe just the power of good and the power of evil, not really thinking much about it. Some years ago I was suffering from depression and I got rid of it but it came back again about four years ago, and that's when I moved to *****.
SB
How did you come to go on the Alpha course in the first place?

BL10
When I moved to ***** I didn’t know anybody except my middle brother, the atheist, and his wife who is a Christian. When I had been in ***** for about six months I was still suffering from depression, I was still very unhappy, but I didn’t know many people and I joined some mountaineering clubs but not anything particular in *****. My sister-in-law, who is the Christian and goes to quite a conservative C of E church in ***** said, "Why don’t you go along to Alpha?" I said, "What’s Alpha?" and she said "Oh, it’s just a drink at the main church in *****." She said, "It just gives you a chance to make some friends. They’re nice people. They’re not dodgy, because they are church people. It’s a fun church so there will be young people there." She just said it was called Alpha, she didn’t tell me it was anything to do with learning about it. There was also a banquet, but we couldn’t go to the banquet and she didn’t mention it. We went along to the drink at the church. So I went along to that with her, met crazy curate, ***** ******, very young and great fun, and our vicar, ***** ******, who’s nice. Neither of them was wearing purple socks or sandals. They seemed very normal. They weren’t wearing dog collars, which I wasn’t used to, and they started talking about this thing... they were meeting up every Wednesday, there would be a meal. I live alone and I can’t be bothered to cook so that sounded good to me. There’d be a chance to have a bit of a talk afterwards. Any questions I liked. I’d been used to asking Christopher (my eldest brother) questions, but I thought sometimes I offended him. So I said, "Yes, OK", but I really said yes because I liked ***** and the people I met there. And I thought this is a chance to ask questions that I’ve never really had before, so I started going along.

SB
What were your first impression when you turned up. Did the other people seem like you? Were they committed Christian churchgoers? Were they people with no connection with the church?

BL10
My first impression was of course the meal on the first Wednesday night. I didn’t actually talk to anybody else - just ***** really, and just left. It was just a group of people eating a very nice lasagne and just chatting about how they had heard about it and how they were there. They all seemed very nice, but a huge range. Nobody said, "I’m a Christian", or anything like that at the meal. Then we went and had the talk (this is the lecture) and split into little groups, and the first group I was put into they went round and said, "I’m this, I’m that", and they all said, "I’m a Christian but I want to go back to basics", "I’ve been a Christian for some time but I wanted to do an Alpha course." I was the only one who did not believe at all. I stood up and said, "I’m an atheist and I’m not sure if I ought to be here", and they all said, "Yes, yes, yes, you should be", and there was an elderly lady in that group who said, "I haven’t got many years to go, and I want to see what you young Christians think. I thought I’d do a refresher course on what the modern thinking is on Christianity." So I said, "Look, I understand I can ask anything. The first subject is "Who is Jesus?" and I know that
Jesus existed because I did Classical Civilization A-level and I know that the ancient historians mentioned him, and Herod and all the trouble with Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified. So I know the man existed, but not as a god or as God or anything special; and all the evidence you have used to say that he is special comes from the bible, and how do you know the bible's true?" And this old lady piped up, "Well, if you don’t believe in the bible, what on earth are you doing here?" And I was so offended and so hurt and I thought, "It’s an absolute lie, you’re not allowed to ask anything!" Anyway, the leader of the group, who wasn’t very strong but realised that this was a huge problem..... I said to her at the end, "I can’t do this." She said to me, "Come again, please, and I’ll put you in another group where there are non-Christians." So the next week I came along and I was in a group which had a great leader, about four Christians and about six "questionings" or complete non-Christians, and the four Christians had either introduced a friend or were there to help not for refresher courses. So there were five Christians in the group and five non-Christians or questioners, and it was great; the questions we asked were so cynical. So that was my first impression, from going in to getting better.

SB
The talks. Was it a video or a live speaker?

BL10
A different live speaker every week. I was glad of that. I’ve since seen a couple of videos of Nicky Gumbel and it’s not the same. If there’s someone standing there in front of you saying, "I live in ***** and this happened to me and this is my personal experience". OK they are doing the course but they are putting in their own personal experience of it - examples. It’s a huge difference. Nicky Gumbel’s was very distant. These guys come along, a different one each week to do these talks, they were either one of the leaders of the small groups or someone who was attached to the church, and they were really committed. And because they were just doing one talk they could put all their energy into that one.

SB
What did you make of the content of the talks? The teaching contained in it?

BL10
Mostly good, until towards the end. About two-thirds of the way through there was the Holy Spirit Day where everybody goes off and there is the Holy Spirit thing. Now one of the problems was that I couldn’t go because it was a weekend and I hadn’t known to book it out. That’s something they hadn’t mentioned at the beginning, or I hadn’t heard it. I missed out on that, and that was very important to some people there. However, a friend of mine who didn’t have any huge bright lights that day felt the same way about it as me. After that, the talks very much assumed... or turned towards "your life in Christ from now on." We hadn’t gone for it. We called it "getting the certificate" because it was a great jokey group. We were able to say that kind of thing without offending... We hadn’t got the certificate and yet the last four or five talks were all: "Now you’ve got Christ, this is what you do." And I’m going: "We
haven't. We'd like to ask some more questions, please." The talks themselves were good.

SB
Did you find them persuasive?

BL10
Mostly. And if they weren't persuasive, I could go back to my group and say, "I don't agree with that", or "There's this point here that I didn't understand". Sometimes they could answer and sometimes they couldn't, but at least they said they couldn't. But the content was very well designed: simple and not too long, which is always a mistake. If it gets too complicated people stop concentrating.

SB
Can you remember any of the questions that came up in the course of the group discussions?

BL10
It depended, really, who from. Obviously there was quite a lot of going back and forth about how do you know that Jesus really existed. I started that one. It's almost like I broke the ice with the second group I joined because I was very confident because I knew nobody there. My sister-in-law didn't go with me and that always helps me be able to ask questions that I wouldn't dare in front of her. No-one's going to hurt me because they don't know me. That started quite a lot of things off. The complete non-Christians asked the kind of questions which were like: "If we follow these rules then... If we do this then we're thrown out, or is the fact that I've been behaving really badly according to God's laws for the last ten years mean that, you know, this, this, this and this?" A lot of people have problems with forgiveness. A lot of questions about forgiveness. People find that really hard.

SB
Can you remember anything that was said in response to those questions which you found particularly helpful or new or that you hadn't thought of before and that stayed with you?

BL10
So much of it stayed with me, but I'm not sure if I can give specific answers. There was a guy there who could quote the bible almost verbatim and he used to make us laugh, so I can't remember any of those, of course. I remember someone coming up one day and saying (this was one of the Christians) that God has simply disappeared and my telephone line to him has just been cut, and she was really upset. The other Christians were saying, "Go on trying", and even the non-Christians were saying, "Go on trying anyway. We don't actually believe it, but we think you've actually got something good going here." There was a really nice support system. It was very personal. Although people did say, "From the bible... this", that's actually quite terrifying for a new Christian. People kept opening their bible and saying, "It says this". It's kind of like: "I know what the bible says, but how does that work in real
"life?" which, as a new Christian, that's not very easy. The leader, Steve, would say, "Well, I think that....". Sometimes I would say, "Well how do you know God's talking to you?" "Well, sometimes in my quiet time I have this feeling that someone has put an idea in my head and you kind of think, "Oh", or something stops me and that's God guiding me in the right way, not to do it or... If you are having a really bad time and you can look up something in this part, and that's really comforting and just sort of..." I was quite amazed at just how many answers they had and they didn't seem trite or just made up. I've always thought they were just off-pat answers in the past.

SB
Did you feel happy about answers being brought out of the bible?

BL10
That was the hardest thing, probably because I was so far away from Christianity. I think probably if you are used to it, or you have been brought up in that..... My parents never quoted from the bible. You went to church and said your prayers but apart from that you never talked about it. You didn't swear or do anything bad but you also never talked about it. So all this sort of overt talking about it is quite hard. I still find the kind of people who come up with Christian patter.... immediately the hairs start rising on the back of my head. I kind of think: "We're actually in a modern world here, you can translate that into English. And the more they use expressions that are very Christian, the more I think, "O Lord, this isn't for me." I live in this world now, and surely the bible can be in this world now. OK people do have a special language for it, but I found that most people who are in it.... that was a problem.

SB
I would like to suggest six topics, and see if you can remember if any of them arose in the course of your discussions. First: "Life after death".

BL10
No.

SB
"Why are we here?"

BL10
Yes, it did... and an argument of the story of Adam and Eve versus evolution. That kind of thing. And whether Adam and Eve was just a legend to make a point. Whether it really happened. Whether we can take the bible that literally. Evolution has go to be true so somehow you have got to work round that. There was quite a large argument about that. Even some of the committed Christians were saying, "Yes, it's a problem." If you want to be completely literal about it. So yes, it came up.

SB
And can you remember if anything was said that you found helpful or useful or took you forward?
BL10
I can remember a comment: If God put us here and he’s all-powerful and all-loving, why is there so much suffering in the world? That kept coming up. Has he just put us here for a bit of fun? Sometimes it feels like we’re all weak little ants on earth and sometimes get squished and sometimes don’t. If he’s all-powerful why doesn’t he obliterate the devil. That kind of thing came up.

SB
And was any useful response given to those kind of questions?

BL10
Yes, though I can’t remember literally what the response was. I no longer believe or question the fact that if this so-called all-powerful God could sort out why we are all suffering, I suppose I believe more in the fact that if there is a God, there’s a devil too, or a power of evil - Satan, whatever. There’s something out there trying to make us do bad things as well, or not believe. So I won’t have a problem with it so much any more. But I can remember very much feeling at the time: Why are we all so miserable, if God put us on this earth? There were some very clear answers. Our leader was very clear in his mind about a lot of things, and if he wasn’t, he just said so.

SB
And you found that helpful?

BL10
I did. He wasn’t too wordy.

SB
I’m interested in the answers that came up in response to the question of suffering.

BL10
The leaders said. "I believe.." or "I feel that...God put us on this earth, in his image, to try and do good, but when Adam and Eve ate the apple then we were released into the knowledge of all the bad things too. Satan got in there, and now there is a fight in us between good and evil, and God wants us to win the good fight and if we follow him we can get more in that direction. But Satan will have a go, going the other way, and suffering isn’t God saying, "Let’s go and squash a few people." There are all kinds of circumstances that make people suffer...and he did say things like: "I can’t understand why there are things like earthquakes", but he did say that suffering from wars, people-to-people suffering, he would be able to explain, but I can’t explain why sometimes God makes an earthquake, or if it is God making an earthquake, why this happens. He says that 'I’ve just got to trust that God’s got a plan for everybody, and that’s part of it. And it’s much bigger (this was something that struck me) than anything we would ever try and understand.
SB
And you found that helpful?

BL10
I did, because otherwise you try and explain everything, and it's like, 'Hey, no. This guy up there is a lot bigger than us. You can't understand everything'.

SB
OK. Another one I was going to ask you about was religion and science, but you touched on that with the creation / evolution thing.

BL10
Yes, people also came up with.... because I have a feeling at the time there was some arguments about cloning. GM hadn't come up, but cloning had, and people were saying, "What about this?" and again it was.... these people and this guy did, but at the same time there were people who would go the other way. Is it Christian Scientists who won't take any medicine? It's the other end of the scale. God gave us the ability to help ourselves, gave us a brain, brilliance and domination over the other animals, but we have been able to help ourselves, but unfortunately sometimes we go the right way and sometimes we go the wrong way. So although the people I was with did not believe in Christian Science way of doing things, they were saying, "We believe that God gave us strength and brains to make the effort. We're not supposed to just sit there and let things go wrong. We are actually supposed to get up and help ourselves. And actually, funnily enough, although I never really agreed with my parents view of Christianity, that struck a chord because my mother always said, "God doesn't help those who won't help themselves." It's one of the few things she ever did say about God. You don't just sit there and let him either blast you or make you rich. You have also got to make it happen. And this was very much said by this bloke too but not quite so abruptly.

SB
And you found that helpful?

BL10
Yes.

SB
How about the issue of lots of different religions? Did that come up?

BL10
Yes, it did come up. Not that much because there was no-one in my group who felt strongly about other religions being wrong. As far as other Christian religions, there was very much a kind of: "We hope we can all work together. They do it a different way. Hopefully, as long as they are not hurting anybody and not too misguided, that's fine. But if we met them we'd like to be able to talk to them about how we feel better things are, and discuss that, and if they are misguided, hopefully lead them back into a better way of living.
SB
What about other world religions?

BL10
Other world religions that were not Christian. Yes it came up, and they said we can’t condone it because we don’t believe it. We feel that they are misguided. Some of them actually Satan had got hold of them. There are some awful sects and things. We’d never believe in killing other people who don’t believe in the same religion. We’d rather guide them and if we met them try and persuade them or invite them to go on an Alpha course! Which I agree with. I don’t agree with going and killing other people because they don’t believe what I believe. Nor would I shout and scream at them, but I’d like to talk to some that didn’t because it would be interesting and I might hear something.

SB
Did anyone suggest that maybe there are other ways to God equally valid with Christianity?

BL10
No.

SB
"Does God exist?" Did that come up?

BL10
All the time. Myself and another guy were both... he was a complete logical cynic. It was like having my middle brother there actually. I was kind of: "I think there might be something there, but..." - very, very cynical. So we were always going: "Yes, but hang on a minute...." If he’s up there and he’s got all this power and he’s good and he loves us, how come this, how come that, how come the other? Although people couldn’t answer perfectly why there is suffering in the world, because it always came down to that: If he exists, how come...? Why do some people hear him and other people don’t? Why do some people who are good and lead really Christian lives get some awful pain for years and then die, or whatever? And although it was never actually answered, gradually as the time went on I think there was more of an acceptance that.... At some time or other, someone said, "You can look at this two ways. You can look at it from the side of: If you have these discussion on the assumption that God is there, it takes one track. If you have this discussion on the assumption that God is not there, then you are continually going to be up against a brick wall." So I thought, OK, I’ll start talking as if he is there, and I stopped questioning what I believed about it and just started thinking: OK, if he’s there so...blah de blah de blah. And it’s funny; I suddenly started realising that I did, because I had stopped..... And if I actually sit down and think: Do I believe in God? There’s still this old part of me - because it was eighteen years of atheism - and I was thinking: "Still a bit of an effort" and since I have become a Christian some pretty awful things have happened to me, but at the same time I think, well, I don’t think he
 actually did that to me, so I was more of a kind of a gradual... almost in a way leaning, whereas other people a blinding light, so they had no doubt. So yes, it did come up, and it was helpful. Steve's answer was very clever. That wasn't on the Alpha course. No-one on the Alpha course said, "Assume this". But it was very clever.

SB
So you didn't go on the Holy Spirit Day?

BL10
No, but I went on another one some time later, on another Alpha course, which was a shame because they weren't people I had got to know, and I found it rather... didn't like it. Too intense. I'm not a kind of: pat me on the head..... I find it very difficult if people put their hands on me and start praying for me. It's too personal. And I don't know if as you grow as a Christian it becomes easier, but if you've been brought up in the kind of church that I was programmed to, which is definitely not touchy, very impersonal, and you say good morning to the vicar once a week and that's it... I found it very difficult.

SB
What happened on that day?

BL10
They talked about the Holy Spirit and I think there were three parts to it as far as I remember: three different parts by different people. My group, which I didn't go to, they went off to a separate place and I think that was quite special. The one I went on was smaller and so they had it in church premises which meant it was very familiar but not particularly comfortable, and it all seemed a bit pieced together. I don't know if it's because I didn't know the people, but it didn't feel so special, and I can pretty much guarantee I would have felt the same as my friend Diane who was in the other Alpha course. She would have found the whole thing a bit overpowering and would have gone out for a walk when they all started praying for each other, because later on there was this opportunity to pray for each other. Now if you haven't got the certificate, as we called it, that was too heavy.

SB
Was it a moving occasion for people, would you say?

BL10
Yes, about two people from our course felt that that was very much the turning point for them, and three of us (because I think I would have been the same as Diane) didn't feel it was a turning point. In fact it just made me want to question more and more, particularly about the Trinity.

SB
Were there any manifestations of the coming of the Holy Spirit?
BL10
Not on the one I went on but apparently there were on the one that my friend went on.

SB
But you weren’t particularly happy with it?

BL10
No.

SB
Did you go into the course with any particular questions that you wanted answered?

BL10
Yes, lots, because I wasn’t allowed to ask questions. I had asked questions of my brother but I suppose I wasn’t interested enough to ask. But here was a.... I’d had a meal with people who were doing it, so I could ask whatever I liked, and I didn’t know them - that was the big thing. Yes: How do you know God exists? How do you know the bible is true? Why? How? I had questions about forgiveness, I had questions about the Holy Spirit. I had questions about the Trinity which it seemed were too complicated to ask at that point. In fact they didn’t really touch on it because it was too complicated and you could have spent all day doing it. I’ve asked since. I had questions about suffering. Lots. Obvious ones for a new Christian.

SB
And do you feel they were satisfactorily answered?

BL10
I’d say seventy or eighty per cent were, yes. And I was happy that they didn’t come out with a load of dross to the ones they couldn’t answer. And some of them I just disagreed, which was fine too.

SB
The Alpha course claims to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you think that’s a fair claim?

BL10
It could do if you were looking for a meaning in your life. I was very depressed at the time so I suppose that a small part of me was looking for a reason to try and turn a corner into going into something more positive, and Christians certainly seem to be positive about their religion and their beliefs. However, on a more basic level, "a meaning of life", no. For me, it was much more..... this whole Christian thing is questionable, and here was an opportunity to question with a whole load of people that I like. That’s not why I went on it.

SB
Not because it provided an opportunity to explore the meaning of life?
BL10
No, absolutely not, much more an opportunity to have questions answered in a really
good atmosphere. No, it didn’t provide the meaning of life for me.

SB
What sort of people would you say Alpha works best with?

BL10
Communicators. There were a few people in our group who found it very difficult to
ask questions. They just sat there and listened. They were very shy, and it was very
painful getting answers out of them and they all just disappeared afterwards, or they
were around for a bit but drifted away. And aggressive people: people who were all "I,
I, I" and simply took the chair the whole time: "I’ve had this experience, I’ve had that
experience, I’ve had....", never giving anybody else the opportunity to speak. These
are the people it doesn’t work with. Although the group tries to be desperately nice to
them, it also wants them to shut up. They are often people with huge problems, but
it’s jolly difficult to have discussion with people who are behaving like that. The
people it works best for are people who talk to each other openly, because then you
have questions answered, you are able to be part of a conversation that is working
towards some answers. It also means that people got to know each other, so our group
almost became its own support group because we became friends, even though I
would never have met them if I hadn’t gone to that Alpha course. It was great to meet
them, great to talk to them. It was the feedback from those people, the fact that I
started meeting them outside Alpha afterwards, and that’s why it carried on. Those
are the people it worked for. And some cheerful susceptible people were the ones
who got the Holy Spirit Day. Bright lights.

SB
Would you say that you need at least some basic Christian knowledge to benefit from
the course?

BL10
No, except they must know that Christianity exists, and that we have a God and Jesus.
You could have the story of the nativity and that would be about all you needed.

SB
So if you’d never gone to church as a child at all or never read the bible...

BL10
Absolutely. But you might have read the nativity and know that Jesus died on the
cross. That’s probably about all you needed to know.

SB
What would you say the strengths and the weaknesses of the Alpha course are?
Strengths first, perhaps.
The format is very clever. The meal where you meet people. It's not like a lesson or a false situation. It brings people in. It certainly brought me in. That was very clever. Getting people who are in church involved and becoming friends. The fact that the talk was short, had specific points, didn't waffle on. We had our coffee in that talk, so that was good as well. The break out into small discussion groups with the leader and a mixture of some Christians who brought friends and some non-Christians. I do think that mixture is important. That works very well. The weakness without question is that there is no follow up. Our church did a follow up but it was new. It was the first time they had done it. Everyone called it 'Focus', and it hadn't been planned properly and it didn't work nearly as well. Actually there weren't enough people running it. And the fact that after the Holy Spirit Day it was assumed that you believed and you were going to carry on. That was the other weakness.

Do you wish you had done the Holy Spirit Day?

Yes, but I still would have felt the same way. I know I wouldn't have got filled with the Holy Spirit on Holy Spirit Day. I know myself very well. But I would still have wanted to carry on, assuming that you may have been going either way. But we felt very excluded. Our group wasn't like that at all, but we felt it because we hadn't got the certificates.

Finally: Overall impression of Alpha?

Very good idea. Brilliant. Great. In our church, great. I've no idea about other churches.

Thanks

Alpha Graduate (2)

[Request for autobiography]

My father died when I was very young but my mother was always a churchgoer. I was brought up on Evensong in a middle-of-the-road Anglican church, and I went to Sunday School and Guides - they were church companies, youth club. I fell in, in my early teens, with a girl at school who came from a very Evangelical background and actually brought me into contact with the local Evangelicals who were not particularly centred on any one church and actually belonged to what was called the
**** **** Evangelical Choir from about thirteen until I left home. They were a very broad spectrum. I think they went from Salvationists and Pentecostalists through Baptists to me, who was the highest. My faith was taken by the scruff of the neck when I went to the Billy Graham Crusade at Main Road in Manchester, when I was about twelve or thirteen. It all sort of came together at that point, so while I continued to worship at my local Anglican church, my other activities were much more Evangelical and much wider. I left home to go to London to nurse when I was twenty, and I made a conscious decision to - not part company with God, but - take control of my own life; that having felt very much for the previous ten years that God was in control, I decided that it was time that I had a go. I was at the old Charing Cross in the Strand so I used to go to the London churches sometimes; mostly St Martin-in-the-fields - usually to sing hymns. I had very little to do with organised religion until...... my husband and I got married nearly twenty-five years ago and we did get married in church. He’s not a Christian. After my daughter was born I think I was probably very depressed and I scuttled back to the church, probably because it was the only place I felt safe. So I used to go off on a Sunday morning. [Husband] would look after [daughter]; and I would sit quietly at the back of an Anglican church and weep. The vicar would say, “Come and join us for coffee afterwards”, and I would join them for coffee and I’d stand there and I’d think, "Am I invisible?" It was that sort of church. A bit higher than I was used to. Smells and bells. Then we went to Germany and I worshipped with British ex-pat community in our hospital chapel and gradually the focus became more central again. We came here eighteen years ago and the first thing I wanted to know was: Where was the church? I’ve been very involved ever since.

SB
How did you first come across Alpha?

BL8
I must have seen the publicity. It must have just been posters and....... I’ve always taken the Church Times since I’ve been here and I think probably because of the Supplement.

SB
What’s been your experience of Alpha?

BL8
We did a course. I have to say, it did not appeal to me at all. I don’t like the hard sell. I don’t think it’s really as simplistic as it seems....... I hate all the interviews, the: "My life has been changed" sort of interviews. For some reason it was suggested in PCC that we should get the videos. I don’t know how it came up or who it came from...... that we should get the videos and do it as a PCC. A hard core of seven or eight of us embarked on it, and half a dozen of us saw it through.

SB
What was your first impression when it first started? Were all those involved in it to begin with church folk?
Yes.

SB
What are your recollections of how it went to begin with? Did you feel comfortable with it?

BL8
No, I think we felt very uncomfortable with it to begin with. I think we found Nicky Gumbel rather alarming and slightly drastic. There was a lot of mirth around the adoring Pippa and all the bright young things. We felt they weren’t actually coming from where we were coming from. But I think from quite early on, from the second or third video, we sort of felt that theologically it was very helpful. What we really liked was what it did for us as a group, because we are a very middle-class Anglican Church, and there is not a great deal of reality in our day to day interactions. You ask someone how they are and you really rather hope they say they are fine. Because we were meeting on this fortnightly basis, usually over a bottle of wine, some nice nibbles, it engendered this incredible group dynamic, which was wonderful. So we thought that theologically it was good, largely because of the discussion that it engendered, because it showed us that though we were coming from different places, we were the same. So that was very helpful, which in turn made us interact on a deeper level, which was also wonderful. I think the only problem we had was the emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

SB
Did you find Nicky Gumbel as a speaker very persuasive?

BL8
Yes, I think he takes some getting used to. By the end we were very comfortable with him. One came to trust him. The immediate persona that he puts over is rather American - it’s rather superficial. But he becomes quite endearing. The more you know about him - because he’s very self-deprecating, and that actually is quite helpful.

SB
Can you remember what sort of issues came up in the groups?

BL8
The main problem for one of the members who actually voted with his feet was all about (**** is an intellectual) the divine inspiration, the virgin birth, the fundamentalism of the views and the discussion of it. This is somebody who says the creed every Sunday and has been a churchwarden but actually doesn’t say the bits he doesn’t agree with. He found it extremely painful and extremely difficult and actually left because he really couldn’t cope with talking about.... and I think he found it very distressing to see that other people were able to accept things in what he saw as a very simplistic way. This is a very rigorous old Etonian ex-schoolmaster and barrister, and
he couldn't handle it. Then the whole business of sin. A church like this operates on shades of grey, whereas it's rather black and white in his viewpoint. People are struggling with very real personal issues. So there was a lot of interesting discussion around how one coped with that.

SB
I want to throw at you six issues to see if, as far as you remember, any of them actually arose in the course of your discussion. "Life after death".

BL8
Yes. A minor one.

SB
Can you remember anything that was said in the course of discussion that you found particularly helpful?

BL8
I found it very interesting how much it matters to some people. The thing I remember most from the videos is how very important this concept seemed to him. I remember when he talked about his father... he thinks he probably changed his mind at the very last minute. I think that's probably more about salvation than actual life after death. I don't think life after death as such got very high profile.

SB
"Why are we here?" Did that come up as an issue?

BL8
Again, not in discussion, but it clearly mattered to one member of my group that I led, who was totally unchurched, and actually wrote me a card last week saying how much he had appreciated it and how it had shown him a new way of living his life. So although it wasn't something that was discussed, because he didn't actually say very much at all, it clearly had a profound effect on him from that point of view.

SB
The problem of suffering. Did that come up?

BL8
Yes, it did, quite a lot. Not so much in my original group but in the group I led. I think that was partly because I was a nurse and we had a recently retired MacMillan nurse and we also had somebody who has recently had breast cancer, so yes.

SB
Can you remember anything from those discussions that was said that you think was particularly helpful.

BL8
I think the most striking thing was that the person who had had breast cancer was actually talking about an experience that she had in Zimbabwe. She walked into the Holy Spirit Day of an *Alpha* being run in Zimbabwe. She was somebody who was deeply sceptical, she got taken along to this because she happened to be there, and she had a profound experience of comfort with the laying on of hands, which actually I think took everybody by surprise. People were very appreciative that she had shared it.

**SB**
Has the issue of many religions come up?

**BL8**
Yes, the exclusivity was a real stumbling block - that this was the only way. People found that very difficult.

**SB**
"Religion and science". Did that come up as an issue?

**BL8**
Not really, that I remember. Perhaps more in my original group where people's views were more crystallized.

**SB**
"The Existence of God". Did that come up?

**BL8**
No. I think everyone was happy to accept that that was the starting point.

**SB**
Were people in the second group people from outside the church?

**BL8**
Yes.

**SB**
How was that achieved?

**BL8**
In November and December I put in the parish magazine that I was thinking of it happening. I actually had very little response and was beginning to think that actually this was not what God intended me to do, then I had a phone call from a young man whom I have known and felt an affinity for ever since I had lived in the village, saying: 'When is it starting?' That rather bounced me into it. There should have been eight of us; in fact there were only six of us, because two fell by the wayside. Two were from the next parish because I had spoken to the vicar there and she said she'd send people who were interested, four from *****, two were regular churchgoers, one
was my best friend, one was peripheral, and one was the young chap who was totally unchurched.

SB
Two fell by the wayside. Was that before the course started?

BL8
Yes. They had committed themselves and unfortunately blocked places for other people. One was living in the village and in a relationship and it broke up and she moved away. She was in fact a serial Alpha-doer, I think it was her third or fourth time. She obviously saw it as a way to make friends. The other one was from the other village and she was very pregnant and had just got married and I suspect probably events overtook her.

SB
What about the Holy Spirit Day or Weekend? How did you do it?

BL8
We had it as three separate sessions.

SB
What did you think of the teaching on the Holy Spirit?

BL8
I felt it was heavily loaded in favour of the Charismatic movement. I felt that it was not particularly helpful. There was without doubt this emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues, which I felt was the triumph of the congregational church over the community church. I don’t know anyone in ***** who has had that experience, and I’m not sure that any of us felt our lives would be improved by it. What I actually did, because I was concerned about it, particularly the third video, the emphasis was such that you actually went away feeling that in spite of him saying you weren’t second best, you did feel you were second best if you hadn’t actually experienced it. I was quite anxious to guard against that, and I actually invited **** **** from ***** to come. She unfortunately could only come to the first one, but she actually sort of normalised it. She didn’t have any experience of this and in her experience it was not something that was absolutely necessary. (She’s a minister in the next parish). I felt I needed somebody there in case there were difficult questions. Having said that, she actually shared with us an experience of a friend of hers from theological college who equally had no experience and went off on a trip to Japan and was praying with his wife in his hotel room when suddenly he started to speak in tongues. I think we ended up with quite a balanced view of it, but I was quite concerned having seen it once, that it was something one needed to be quite careful about.

SB
You did this as a group instead of going away somewhere for a day?

BL8
Yes. We were a very unorthodox group really because we didn’t have the meal. It was really about where we could hold it, which dictated how we managed it.

SB
Did you yourself enter into the course with any particular questions you wanted answered?

BL8
No.

SB
So, your reasons for doing it?

BL8
Community.

SB
So you saw it as a means of building community. That was more important than anything coming out of the tapes?

BL8
Yes, it was, although in the whole of my Christian life I can’t say that……. if I were keeping score, I wouldn’t be able to say that I’ve led anybody to the Lord. I’m amazed that ***** found something, to him, so remarkable and so valuable. But I think it was a combination of the teaching and the community thing, so I’m not knocking it!

SB
The Alpha course claims to provide an opportunity to explore the meaning of life. Do you think it does that?

BL8
Yes, it does, particularly for those with an open mind.

SB
What sort of people do you think Alpha works best with?

BL8
In my limited experience I would say it works best with the unchurched.

SB
Does it require any Christian knowledge to begin with?

BL8
No. I think it’s probably better if you don’t have any.

SB
Is there anybody you think it would be unlikely to work with?
BL8
The churched, I think. The cradle Christians who have been plodding away at the coal-face all their lives.

SB
Why do you think that is?

BL8
Because I think it has the power to persuade rather than the power to touch, and I think people with entrenched views only change if they are touched, and I don’t think it has that power. For people like my young man, who has never really addressed the issues, who has a sense that there is a God because he is in touch with nature - he looks up at the stars - to find out that there really is a God and there is a better way to live my life is a very powerful thing for him. I think the hardened cynics, like my Etonian barrister, they’ve constructed a belief system that’s far too complicated, I think, to be addressed by this. I think it changed my friend who had the experience in Zimbabwe. It was the week between being diagnosed as having cancer and starting Chemotherapy. To go, as she did, with her life in absolute ruins, and for somebody to lay hands on her and pray over her and to actually come away from that feeling that she was no longer worried: that’s what it did. It took away all the fear. So much so that other people noticed it. That, I think, is the only sort of experience that is actually going to change people who have got a well-formed belief-system; and I think that’s perhaps where the Weekend would be (and I’m very sceptical about shutting people up together for a weekend and exposing them to that) but I think that’s probably where the believer might change, but I think not otherwise.

SB
What do you think the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha are?

BL8
As a movement?

SB
As a tool, as a phenomenon, as a course.

BL8
Its strengths are that it’s raised the profile of religion, of Christianity. It’s made it attractive. If the congregation on the video are representative it’s done a huge amount. My daughter has just graduated from Surrey and they’ve had Student Alpha and I know that it’s had a profound effect on a lot of people. I think it’s tremendous from that point of view. I don’t think that I can think of many negative things to say about it. It’s not for everybody, but I suppose the only thing I would say, and it’s always been the same with the Evangelical movement, is that it...... I think for vulnerable people it is always dangerous to be told that there is an answer to their problems. I hope that there is the support for the vulnerable who feel they have found something which is going to change their lives, because it will without doubt, but it needs the
support, the infrastructure, and that is perhaps what worries me more than anything. I’ve seen a lot of damage done to people who think they have found something that is going to make everything all right; and it doesn’t.

SB
So you see that as a weakness really?

BL8
Yes, I think that’s a danger.

SB
Any other particular strengths or weaknesses.

BL8
I’m very admiring of the whole organisation. I had a phone call not long ago from a young woman who was asking me how things had gone. I’m forever being bombarded with mailshots. I had a ring at the doorbell a couple of days ago and it was my young man asking where the Christian bookshop was in ***** because at the end of the Alpha manual it told him about a book on how to pray and he wanted to go and buy it. I think it’s a very slick organisation, but I think they managed to make it slick in a British way. I don’t think it’s American slick. I don’t think it’s shoddy. I think they have probably covered all the bases.

SB
Overall impression of Alpha?

BL8
Thought-provoking. Well-presented. A useful tool, I think, if used thoughtfully.

SB
Thank you.
What experience do you have of Alpha?

On one level it's quite limited. I've studied the materials as a background to the article, but I've not been involved in running an Alpha course, and I've not been involved in Alpha conferences or anything like that. Never been to one. So - someone on the sidelines being a bit of a critic. But obviously I'm also someone with an ear open to the way it's working out in public.

Alpha claims to offer 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life.' Do you think it does live up to that claim?

Well, I think to the extent that you buy into Jesus's 'The way, the truth and the life', I think it offers a way into the Christian gospel. So the claim is qualified in people's minds. It isn't a generalized account of all sorts of different people's approaches to the meaning of life, and then maybe offering one. It just simply offers Christ. So at that level it's....

A fair claim?

It's a fair claim in its own terms, I think. If you buy that Jesus is the meaning of life. If you don't buy that, then it doesn't. But it is evangelism, and therefore what do you expect? Billy Graham said 'life', didn't he? The poster said 'life'. Maybe the question doesn't arise for Billy Graham because it's less participative and interactive. But actually, surely it's a good thing - it's a move in the right direction.

Nicky Gumbel, when he is speaking to journalists, will sometimes say of Alpha: "These are the things upon which we are all agreed." How true do you think that is?

What are 'the things', and who are 'we'?

He's talking about the topics covered in the Alpha course.

It's complete nonsense, isn't it? It's got to be. You can't say that the past Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, and John Hapgood, and the Pope all agree roughly with
whatever the book of talks is called. It's nonsense. It's clearly an angle on things. Having said that, it's roughly in trinitarian orthodoxy, I'd say.

SB
Does anything strike you that particularly would not be universally accepted in the church.

PW
All the stuff about the Holy Spirit - the charismatic movement. Not everyone plays along with that. The interesting thing is, every time I talk to someone about Alpha, they always say: "We do Alpha, but..." Everyone says it. Then they go on to say the little bit they change or the talk that they don't give in the way that it says in the book, or the Weekend that they don't run. Everyone customises it, in my experience.

SB
What do you think the purpose of Alpha is?

PW
Do you mean purpose or function?

SB
Both.

PW
I think its stated purpose - its aim - is evangelism. I think its function is more complex.

SB
Could you say a bit more about that?

PW
Yes. I'd say that one of its functions is that if you run an Alpha course then you're a 'lively' church. All those lists of the churches currently running Alpha in the middle of the Church Times. If you really want to be shown as being alive and part of 'the scene' you get your name on that list. So, one of the functions, I think, is like the league tables in The Times, for schools. Its function is: 'We do Alpha...our Alpha group....' I think that particularly for clergy, but churches as well, it's a badge of liveliness and identity - being on the ball. Nevertheless, that's not a bad thing. It seems to me that if evangelism, doing something, is something that people value, then that's a good thing. I think another one of its functions is.....My sense in the nineteen-eights was that the Evangelical church was quite ghettoised, and what Alpha has done is it has managed to create a means whereby significant numbers of people can be engaged in mission - reaching out - a joint project, and so on. Then I think another one of its functions is - and definitely third in terms of impact and priority - I think probably are the numbers of people that it is attracting to the church. Just from my own experience in this area, it's having a significant impact on local churches, just in these villages. There are two Alpha courses that have been running
over a number of years, and what’s interesting is that the first years that they’d run it seems like they’d been packed out with a lot of padding: of Christians who are redoing it. Shelf-filling, really. But then once they get into (some of these are now into their third time through) they really are seeing significant numbers of people who are on the fringes of church, or not churchgoers at all who are committed to......they’re coming along to these things. In fact my wife heard this story just this weekend, of a friend of hers who lives in Derby. She and a friend (not church people) have been going along to an Alpha course, and particularly the friend of a friend....this is a person who is interested in finding out about Christianity and she’s gone to Alpha to find out in the local village. This is the second Alpha that she’s done. The first one she didn’t feel really answered her questions. It was filled with too many Christians talking about it, and this one she wants to go along and talk with a bunch of non-Christians, so she’s persuaded this other person to go. It’s held in the local church hall. This week the vicar arrived at the end of Alpha and booted them all out, saying ‘We can’t have you lot hanging around in here - get out!’ The most unwelcome thing that there could be. But this person is a non-Christian who is still committed to go along to it to find out what’s going on. Now I don’t think that we’ve had anything that operates a s shop-window. There’s no obvious place where you can buy God if you are not a church person, because our churches operate as closed clubs, and our liturgies are impenetrable on the whole. What Alpha offers is something like.....If you’re into the New Age, then there are introductory books and conferences you can go on, and weekends where you can learn how to prat about with your tarot cards. This is an obvious shop-window, so I think it’s an important thing.

SB
How effective do you think Alpha is in your experience? Do you want to add anything to what you’ve just said?

PW
I’ll just repeat what I say. Other people - someone like Martyn Percy - may have written - I’m not quite sure - ....a lot of people would look at Alpha and say it’s just a lot of Christians. My feeling is, if you’ve got a group of ten people, of whom eight are Christians and two are non-Christians, you can look at it and say it’s a certain percentage non-successful because it’s got eight Christians in it. But on the other hand it’s got two people who are just looking. How many of our services have even that many people who are actively looking and willing to come along. The other thing is, in my experience, that you run Alpha, and from what people tell me about it, quite often, in order to make it go or to keep it going, you need to stuff it with some Christians. But every now and again you hit the jackpot with a significant number of non-churched people. Let’s face it, how many people at Billy Graham crusades were Christians? Probably two-thirds. How many who went down the front were already Christians?

SB
Do you think Alpha addresses the questions that ordinary people are asking?
PW
The ordinary person is asking questions about why does the rail service not work. How can I get cheaper flights to Spain? It’s not answering those questions quite clearly. Neither is it answering people’s curiosity questions about pop music or the soaps. So there are large areas of life that are left out by Alpha, clearly. On the other hand it is talking about God, the Christian faith. It’s self-selecting. Five out of ten cat owners who expressed a preference said their dog preferred it. In the area of religion, it’s roughly in the right ball park. I have to say that Nicky Gumbel’s talks and his imaginings about what people are really interested in are rather obscure. How on earth this works, I’ve got no idea!

SB
How do you account for the apparent numerical success of Alpha?

PW
I think in terms of non-churched people, I think the first thing is it’s managed to produce a shop window for Christianity. Just in terms of publicity and public awareness. Other than George Carey and Cliff, there is nothing else that’s got the national profile in terms of Christianity, so they’ve managed to enter the hyper-real. They’re in play, which is an extraordinary achievement, I think. Because they are in play, be it good stories or bad stories, there’s a public awareness about it. Secondly, I think it’s successful because it has relational elements to it. Friends bring friends, they have meals, there’s question and answer, there’s time away. I think that it has a soft relational element to it, and a non-judgemental: ‘We’ll talk about these things’ element to it. Then the other side is: you’ve got the talks and all of that, which I think.....you see the paradox is, I think the liberal mentality is that there’s lots of questions and that questioning is the contemporary person’s approach to life. That’s nonsense; complete nonsense. Contemporary people don’t want to question. The evidence is that people are much keener that you’re really clear about what you think everything’s about and you just tell them, so they can just say yes. I think they want a soft relational environment where you can talk about things, but they also want just a plain ‘sock it to us’.

SB
You think Alpha does that?

PW
Yes.

SB
The crisis point for people who do the course, and probably the most controversial part of the course is this Holy Spirit Weekend, or Day away. Do you have any thoughts about that?

PW
I haven’t looked into it in detail, but yes, it certainly is the crunch point. My own feeling is that increasingly what people want is an experiential encounter with God,
and if you are doing evangelism with people you need the telling of the story element and the talking about it element, but you also need somewhere where people experience God, and that means creating another box. What Alpha has done is they’ve managed to create that box to some extent and ‘all power to them’, really.

SB
What response did you have to your article in Anvil?

PW
I got a lot of response from people who were pleased that I’d stuck my neck out a bit. Some of those were very irritated that it appeared I had Alpha down on the floor and I didn’t really kick it in the teeth. Alpha is something of a holy cow, and a number of people came up and said to me: ‘We use Alpha, we appreciate Alpha, but we see that there are problems, and you’ve expressed some of those, and you’ve done it in a way where you aren’t overly critical of it. So that basic aim of it was quite good. The response from Holy Trinity Brompton itself was to try and get me on the Today programme to debate it, so they were like Slap! Bang! into serious anti-spin mode at the highest profile that they could. Secondly, behind the scenes there was an awful lot of connecting with powerful, rich people who had connections with me, and they wanted to shut me up. They manoeuvred powerfully at both levels actually. But actually I went to see them - to see Sandy and Nicky and talk about it. They were disgruntled about aspects of the paper, and I think I can see from their perspectives where they might be. I think their problem was that they would perceive me as someone who generally would be positive about what they were about, and I was trying to be positive about what they were about, but there were bits in the paper which were probably not expressed as well as they could be, I would say.

SB
Sandy Millar wrote a response in the Church Times. Were you disappointed by that or did you anticipate it, or did it make you feel cross? How did it make you feel?

PW
There were two things really. The piece in the Church Times went in without my knowledge. I was at a conference when they took the decision to extract it. That suddenly jumped it into.....OK, I was in an obscure Evangelical journal that sits in the common rooms of theological colleges.....and a few ‘keenoes’ - on their shelf. Suddenly it was right in the public domain, and suddenly I had national newspapers and radio stations ringing me up. The problem was that the story was: ‘Archbishop’s officer slams Alpha.’ I wrote this as an academic working at Kings College, but actually I was also an Archbishop’s representative; and it was the Archbishop bit that interested the media, and also it was the Archbishop’s bit that......I don’t think that HTB would have taken any notice whatsoever, or had any reaction whatsoever to an article in Anvil by someone..... But it went in the Church Times, and I was an Archbishop’s person. So suddenly there was a story. Alpha had been very keen to elicit endorsements from a wide variety of people, and then publicise those ad nauseam, really. The Archbishop has been someone who has expressed commitment to it, and I might be shaking that a bit, which of course......it wasn’t written with his
knowledge or any involvement on his part. They would have shut me up! My feeling about the reactions to it is that: if I were to write the article again, there are four paragraphs at the end of the piece saying: 'The implications about this are.....Alpha might be superficial, or it might be....blah, blah, blah.' If I re-wrote it again, I wouldn’t write those bits.

SB
Why not?

PW
Because my chief point is that Evangelicalism has embraced McDonaldisation. That’s the chief argument, and I want to try and say: ‘Look, we are uncritically and unreflectively buying in to market advertising type productive/consumptive relationships - the franchising relationship, the branding relationship, and that this is changing church life and it’s changing the way the church relates.

SB
Would you leave those last bits out because you don’t agree with them anymore or because you feel they might upset people?

PW
I’d leave them out because the point was, for Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Millar, they are saying: ‘Well you say you like us but you’ve said it’s superficial, it’s.....blah de blah...’ When I actually wrote those paragraphs, the thing is that when you read the paragraphs, they are very balanced but they have a sentence at the end that is cooking! It’s too clever. They’re too slick. If you just take those last lines, which when I talked with Nicky Gumbel, he did. He said: ‘Look, Pete, you’ve said this, you’ve said that’, and I did. The problem was that that distracts from the key point which is: if we’re buying into a market productive environment, that has implications, and I think the precise implications that I pushed may have been startling and got people looking at it but it hasn’t really got people doing it and looking at what the key factors were, which is that a new ecclesiological entity has entered the UK scene, and that is one based on brand, marketing, publicity, advertising, and that that is remarkably successful, in fact it’s arguably the only successful thing on the block. But that needs thinking about. Worship songs are the other thing. They are exactly the same animal. The other thing I would say is that my piece seems to imply that McDonaldisation affects the way people get the gospel, so the person coming to Alpha.....I now think that article is mistaken in that sense. I think (and this is probably because I haven’t done an Alpha myself) that if I had done an Alpha myself I might have realised that this is not a bland McDonaldised environment that people come to. It’s actually quite a rich environment, and that’s why it’s successful.

SB
I thought it was the product - the Christianity package that’s being presented.....is that what you meant is bland?
PW
No. I might have said that in the article. I now disagree with that. I think my view is that what is franchised and packaged is a way of doing evangelism that’s sold to churches.

SB
What I understood was that the version of Christianity which is presented to them through the talks....I thought you were saying that that is a rather bland version of Christianity.

PW
Yes. I said that. But I think I would draw back from that a tad, because of all the qualitative interaction that takes place in questions and answers and the weekends away, and all the other things that surround it, that make it work. Here, for instance, in this village, the meetings at the school gate - the other relational connections between Christians and non-Christians that Alpha helps facilitate. Evangelism. So, OK, Nicky Gumbel and the books and all of that are a bit of a packaged product, but I think that’s part of something that it’s the branded, franchised thing that is given to the church as a tool to use. But when it is used it’s not used in an impersonal way.

SB
In the article you do counterbalance your criticism by restating that God is at work in Alpha. You say that more than once in the article. I’d like to ask you to say what you mean by that. And to sharpen up that particular question, I’d like to quote just one short extract from one of the letters of criticism that appeared in the Church Times, which criticised you for not going far enough. It says this:

His weak claim that God is at work is never substantiated. That thousands of Alpha courses go on is no proof that anyone is being saved, any more than the fact that thousands of slimming courses are held is proof that people are actually losing weight.

So, you’ve claimed that God is at work in Alpha. He says you’ve said that, but you’ve not offered any evidence or proof of that. What do you mean by ‘God is at work in Alpha’?

PW
In the Alpha News every week there are piles of stories of people whose lives have been changed through Alpha and through God working through Alpha, and I’ve got no reason to doubt that those things are not substantially true. They’re not making those stories up. The individuals are not duped. I think something’s going on with them, and my own experience here locally is that significant things have gone on in people’s lives through Alpha. It’s been an important connection. So I’ve got no problem in saying that God is at work through Alpha. And not just ‘God is at work’, but it’s probably one of the more significant things that’s happening in the country.

SB
So you’re saying more than ‘God is at work everywhere - through the world - through
His creation - through everything that the church does.’ You’re saying something more specific than that.

PW
Yes. I think God is at work making the trees grow. Fair enough. God sustains life, God suffers with the suffering. But I also think we see God’s intervention in people’s lives, changing them and drawing them to himself, and I think Alpha has been used that way.

SB
If you’d put that in your article, maybe that would have pacified Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel a bit!

PW
I doubt it.

SB
What sort of topics would you want to see covered in any course that was designed to introduce the unchurched to Christianity.

PW
In terms of broad topics I wouldn’t have it substantially different, I don’t think.

SB
Some clergy and others think there are things missing from it.

PW
It’s not an area that I’ve thought about terribly much. Quite often when clergy talk about these sorts of things it feels a bit to me like plumbers comparing the merits of different types of tap. I just want to know whether the water’s on and whether it looks nice.

SB
What do you think is the best way to introduce someone to the Christian faith? Or how do you think evangelism works best?

PW
I think nine times out of ten it’s... firstly, it’s where God draws people to himself, and our intentions in things can often be secondary. But I think also it’s always a combination of relationships and also the church in some way putting itself out there. To give an example once again from here - this local parish - it’s relationships on the school gate or through the mothers and tots or whatever, plus a decent Sunday service. Or a particular pastoral visit, or from youth work, it’s relationships built by meeting young people in their school or something like that. But also, it’s a worship event where they can meet God. It’s this combination of putting yourself out there and relationships. What Alpha does is it gives your average voluntary-type worker in the
church, your average Christian person, an easy way of doing that. That’s what’s valuable about it.

SB
Do you see any difference between adult religious education and adult Christian education? Or to put it another way, do you see any difference between religious questions and Christian questions? Then I’m going to ask you which you think the church should be involved in.

PW
Someone said: “No-one ever came to faith through inter-faith dialogue.” I think there are certain ideologies around education which almost preclude evangelism. There’s some notion about being value-free, theologically uncommitted or whatever, and presenting this, that or the other as whatever. For me, the distinction between religious education and Christian education would be that one has a commitment to neutrality and some notion of the equal value of all things, and the other has a theological commitment to Christianity as true and the rest of things fit around that.

SB
Which do you think the church should be involved in?

PW
I think the first one is a bit like turkeys voting for Christmas. I would take the example of schools. Since the nineteen-forties we’ve embraced these kind of ideologies and we’ve successively invested in these areas. We’ve had church colleges educating people to educate people in these things, and the net result has been a gradual decline of the church. In other words, our chief strategy to initiate the next generation into the faith - religious education in schools - has been garbage in terms of numbers of people. If you’re judging it by church life, we’ve not managed to sustain our impact on society. In other words, it’s a failure, I think. So my feeling would be that, having said that, that distinction that I’ve just made between Christian education and religious education is a construct of modernity, and in criticising religious education, as I described it and its effect on society (or non-effect), the problem has been that if that’s a failure, then should we opt for Christian education? My view is that an exclusivist Christian education has got a problem with an apologetic in contemporary culture. Somehow what is needed is a commitment to Christian faith which avoids imperialistic frameworks but doesn’t deny a commitment. So in a way you want neither Christian education or religious education, you want something different.

SB
When I first started this research I interviewed a lot of people who, as far as I’m aware, wouldn’t necessarily have had any particular Christian commitment or even heard of Alpha, and I asked them if they were to go to a course which claims to explore the meaning of life, what sort of issues would they expect it to deal with? The issues they came up with were: Why is there suffering in the world? Is there a God? What about life after death? Why are there so many religions? Broad religious (or
human) questions - those are the questions that they are asking. Alpha deals with the internal Christian questions: Who was Jesus? What about the Holy Spirit? etc. Which should the church be involved in?

PW
My feeling is...some of those questions that people have responded to you with...firstly, they might just be responding to you with things that they think you want to hear, so I'd be suspicious of them. But I think the other thing is that the Alpha course is talking about the meaning of life in relation to its particular take on life, and in order to discuss its particular take on life, you have to manoeuvre the ground on which you are going to discuss, to some extent, I think.

SB
Is that a legitimate thing to do?

PW
Yes, I think so, because I think in a lot of ways people are rather clueless about where you start with these things. If you’re going to end up talking about Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, and as the root of the meaning of life, it’s a lot easier to start a bit closer to where he is than it is to spend five weeks talking about whether aliens built the pyramids, because frankly it’s a distraction. It might be what somebody wants to talk about, but it’s not necessarily what we should spend our time doing. Why muck about?

SB
How important do you think numerical growth should be in the church?

PW
What is it that Jesus says: ‘One sinner that repents - there is rejoicing in heaven.’ Numbers are made up of ones. In other words, if we talk about one person coming to faith, then that’s one person whom God rejoices over, and presumably if we talk about five, then that’s five individuals whom God rejoices over. In other words, it’s important for the individual’s life, I think. So when you say five thousand people have been touched by this, I think its meaning lies in each unit. So it is meaningful to say five thousand, because we’re saying five thousand people’s lives might have been changed by this. So I see that as important. In terms of Christianity in this country, there are large sections, particularly of the Anglican church, who for decades have had the majority of power and the majority of resources, and then presided over the decline of the church, and they have created theological legitimations for that. While the numbers thing feels reductive and crude and all the rest of it, the problem is that...the Church of England, if we look at a diocese like this, however many clergy there are - let’s say there are five hundred clergy - there are probably eighty out of those five hundred who are engaged in active evangelism where something is happening, that you could say in the last year a few people have come to faith, and then there are probably four hundred and twenty who are either clueless or they are ideologically against. We are piling loads of resource in terms of plant, training people, energy, into people who are just not productive. In fact, quite a lot of them are
presiding over things that are declining, and that's causing serious problems to that smaller percentage who are actually going somewhere. We're now finding that for every clergy person that goes into the ministry, if the young clergy can now look forward to overseeing four, five, six parishes in some rural......it's actually hampering what's going on. It's quite important. The church could disappear from the UK, and that's not an exaggeration. It could disappear from some parts of the country. The Methodists almost have, haven't they? the URC almost have. They are in serious crisis. The Anglican church is struggling. It's serious. Numbers are serious, I think.

SB
How do you measure the success of a church, then, when you say it's struggling?

PW
If there are five people and a dog at Sunday worship, it's struggling isn't it? I think. I do believe in long journeys of unsuccessful faithful discipleship. I think that's really key. It's very important that we embrace that. On the other hand, just the pure economics and institutional survival says we can't put all our eggs in that basket. It's a bad idea. Similarly, I'm sympathetic towards people being engaged primarily in some kind of social care or involved in really difficult caring projects and so on where you don't see evangelistic numbers building big churches etc. But if we put all our eggs in that basket, we won't have a church in the future to fund it.

SB
Alpha seems to fly in the face of what is going on educationally, both within and outside the church in that these days education tends to be exploratory and open-ended. Theological courses for training clergy make use of secular universities that have no particular church frame of reference. Alpha seems to be going against that in that it's offering a whole package of answers. Is that a good thing?

PW
Karl Barth was not exploring neutrally. He constructed a position. He was a creative theologian. He was not just a critic, he was a creator, and I think theological education needs to be. The great theologians of our day (Jurgen Moltmann) are not purely critics, they are people who are putting forward visions of hope and revelation. I think we sell our education short if we don't get to visions. I think there's something fundamentally wrong. People are not taught theological imagination and contextualisation in contemporary culture in theological education.

SB
I think they are in modern theological training courses, where there is a great emphasis between the relationship between theology and praxis. The ones I see spend a lot of time in parish and then they will try to relate that to their theology.

PW
There is that. I don't think people live by a spirituality that is open-ended. Not really. I think people go through divorce, suffering of various kinds, they move house,
change jobs, out of vision. I think real lives of faith....they might be full of mystery and uncertainty, but actually it’s a real commitment to mystery and uncertainty.

SB
The problem of suffering is usually stated in generalised terms, but when those people actually get in a group they want to talk about ‘my’ suffering, what happened to ‘me’. They don’t really want an abstract discussion about suffering, or pain, or evil. It’s always thoroughly grounded in ‘me’.

PW
I think what Nicky Gumbel offers - what is for some people a really helpful picture and vision and a way forward, and yes, it is light years away from theological education; and his theological take on things, some might consider naive.

SB
Group leaders are encouraged to let people say whatever they want, but there is an agenda that that leader is working to, to steer that group towards. I’m a little bit more sceptical about the testimonies - stories of success. All those testimonies adopt a similar pattern. It usually starts off with: “I was taken to church as a youngster, but it was boring and my parents weren’t proper Christians, I only went cause I had to.....” They are very disparaging of early religious experience. There are clear stages they go to on their way to conversion at the Holy Spirit Weekend. It seems to me that the only reason they can recognise what Nicky Gumbel is on about is because of that very early experience they have had of the church. For someone who has had no Christian background at all, I don’t think would have the first idea what Alpha was talking about, and those, I think are probably the ones that tend to drop out.

PW
There’s this distinction that church planters make between unchurched and non-churched, or de-churched.

SB
When I was on the Alpha Conference and there was a training session for group leaders they said that when you’ve got your group, the first thing people will do is to lay down their Christian credentials. “I got married in church...I used to sing in the choir...” Nicky Gumbel says, if you are the group leader, don’t allow that. The first thing you’ve got to do is locate the person in that group who is most antagonistic towards Alpha, towards the church, towards Christianity, and get them to speak first. Then the others will voice their scepticism. Then, when they’ve been through the course, had their crisis point at the Alpha Weekend and then give their testimony, when you ask them when they became a Christian, they won’t say, as they would have done earlier on (‘actually I always was...’), they will say: “I became a Christian at the Holy Spirit Weekend. For that conversion to be that much more meaningful and dramatic, you have to make sure you start the group off with people being antagonistic if at all possible. That, combined with the pattern these Alpha testimonies always adopt makes me a bit sceptical.
PW
I think that's fine, to be a bit sceptical of them, and also you've got to think about: probably the Alpha News is put together by about one or two people who are the basic journalists, and they might have a stylized pattern, after all, the Acts of the apostles has a stylized version both of the preaching of the gospel and the way people come to faith.

SB
Idealized I think, more than stylized. Even when the shadow of the apostles fell upon them they were healed!

PW
I've got no problem with that, really. The Alpha thing clearly has a high element of spin about all of its material.

SB
It's very difficult to gauge just how successful it is.

PW
Yes, it's very dodgy. It's almost as dodgy as the pricing structure of mobile telephones.
APPENDIX 4

Letter to Clergy

Dear (name of cleric)

I write to ask a favour

(Name of rural dean) passed on your name to me as someone who might be willing to help me out with a bit of fieldwork that I am doing for a part-time PhD in the Department of Educational Studies at Surrey University.

I am interviewing clergy and laity who have had some experience of the Alpha course or who may have interesting observations to make regarding the Alpha phenomenon more generally. I am hoping that you might be willing to be interviewed for half an hour or so and, if you have been running Alpha, suggest some individuals from your parish who have been through the course and who also might be willing to be interviewed.

I have already successfully carried out this exercise in (name of other deanery) and I am hoping to repeat the format in (this deanery). The research is being largely sponsored by the Guildford Diocesan CME Fund and, for reasons of detachment, it is preferable that I carry out the fieldwork in a diocese other than my own. All the usual rules of confidentiality apply in that no individual or institution will be identifiable in the thesis or any subsequent publication.

I will give you a ring in the next few days and, if you are amenable, perhaps we could take it from there.

Many thanks

Yours sincerely

Stephen Brian
REFERENCES


*Alpha News*, published three times per year by Holy Trinity Brompton, London.


*Alpha Website: www.Alpha.org.uk*


Gumbel, N, *Questions of Life*, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1993


Gumbel, N, An interview on News At Ten, ITV, 9th September 1998:
"What we’re looking at on the course are the issues about which we are all agreed as Christians: questions about who is Jesus, about why did he die, about how can we be sure about our faith, about the bible, prayer, guidance, the Holy Spirit. All these essentials of the Christian life."

Gumbel, N, speaking at the London Alpha Conference, 16-17, HTB, November 2000

Gumbel, N, Interviewed 14th March 2001 at Holy Trinity Brompton

Hays, R B, First Corinthians - Interpretation, John Knox, Louisville, 1997

Holloway, R, Doubts and Loves - What is left of Christianity, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2001

Hunt, S, Anyone For Alpha?, DLT, London, 2001


Ireland, M, A Study of the Effectiveness of Process Evangelism Courses in the Diocese of Lichfield, with Special Reference to Alpha, MA dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2000

Jarvis, P, The Educational Mission of the Church to Adults - A Quest for Truth, unpublished paper, 2002


Lukes, S, Power: A Radical View, Macmillan, Oxford 1974


Mezirow, J, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, 1991, Jossey-Bass, California, USA.

Millar, S, Developing Ministry on Alpha, (VIDEOTAPE), HTB, London, 1999


Pridmore, J, ‘Diary’ column in the *Church Times*, London, 27th July 2001. (The Revd Dr John Pridmore is the Rector of Hackney)


Saward, M, Letter to the *Church Times*, London, 22nd January 1999


Ward, P, Interviewed 5th February 2001 at Newbury, Berks.


