

PRISON ALPHA COURSES IN ENGLAND AND WALES

by John Race

Alpha has dramatically broken out of its original local church context and now is a worldwide phenomenon. It is estimated to have been employed at some stage by approximately one in six churches in England. The Alpha course is a series of fifteen sessions exploring the Christian faith, usually spread over ten weeks.

There is a common misconception that Nicky Gumbel started the Alpha course, and that he is the original author of the course. While it is true that Gumbel has written the books currently available on the Alpha course and is seen as ‘the key figure as far as Alpha is concerned’,¹ the course was running at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) well before Nicky Gumbel arrived as curate in 1986. Alpha can be traced back to 1977 when Charles Marnham, then curate at HTB, designed a six session course. Each session began with a meal in his flat, then a talk followed and it concluded with discussion in small groups. According to Marnham, the aim of the course was to follow up people who had recently become Christians, although from the beginning it attracted people who had not yet become believers.. Mark Ireland mentions that subsequent curates added elements to the course, including the weekend away, and from 1986 Nicky Gumbel made further revisions, particularly with non-churchgoers in mind.³

Alpha for Prisons and Caring for Ex-Offenders

The first Alpha course in a UK prison began in HMP Exeter in January 1995. It was started in response to requests from Michael Emmett and his father to do the course during their custodial sentences for drug dealing. By the next year eight courses were running in UK prisons. As the Emmetts were transferred to different prisons they managed to get Alpha courses started in the prisons and persuaded other inmates to attend the courses. In 1997 the *Alpha for Prisons* office was established at HTB as a result of the increasing demand for Alpha courses in prisons. HTB claimed that by November 2000 there were 125 prisons running Alpha courses out of 158

in the UK (79 per cent). The 2003 figure was 135 out of 169 prisons, over 80 per cent of all prisons in Great Britain, run Alpha courses, and in 2006 it is, according to the *Alpha for Prisons* website, said to be 83 per cent. My research in 2003/4 indicated that in England and Wales the figure is lower than figures produced by Alpha HTB. While there was contact with Alpha teams and the use of Alpha materials in many prisons, the actual number of complete Alpha courses running in prisons was much lower than the figures produced by HTB.

Sandy Millar has stated that the success and rapid spread of Alpha in prisons occurred completely unexpectedly and took him by surprise.⁴ It has confounded a number of people that a course originally developed by and for upper middle class Christians in the wealthy Knightsbridge area of London should become popular in Her Majesty's Prisons.

Prison chaplains, HMP Chaplaincy staff, prison governors and senior Home Office officials, including Ministers, have approved, and some have strongly endorsed, the Alpha course in prisons.⁵ *Alpha for Prisons* has been set up with the following aim:

*to help reduce the re-offending rate by giving every person in prison the opportunity to attend an Alpha course and by linking prisoners who have completed Alpha with a supportive church.*⁶

Such an aim inevitably leads to the *Caring for Ex-offenders* ministry of Alpha. Those leaving prison after an Alpha course need the nurture of Christians in the community.

In June 2004 the *Alpha for Prisons/ Caring for Ex-offenders* office at HTB had on their records 700 registered churches willing to help exoffenders and 439 ex-offenders linked to a supportive church.⁷

The Alpha for Prisons and Caring for Ex-Offenders programme is a relatively young, inexperienced and small organization when compared to other agencies and organizations working in the prison and after care of the ex-offender field. It has a small, dedicated staff that is smaller than Prison Fellowship and far smaller than a local probation office. The smallest unit in the National Probation Directorate has much more staff than HTB. It is very dependent on external funding for its survival and hopes to gain more funding from central Government. In relation to the number of prisoners released from custody in one year, the total number of 439 ex-offenders in their records (gathered over the past few years) is hardly impressive at all.

In time it is likely that these ex-prisoners will have a lower rate of re-offending and recidivism, partly because they have been helped through various interventions that are known to work. There are complications, however, attached to producing evidence of lower rates of re-offending. Alpha for Prisons has only been operating since 1995 and some offences do not show up for years. Sex offenders and certain criminals can go undetected for years before they are convicted and returned to custody. It would be extremely difficult to assess the relationship between Alpha and reduced offending, and also the impact of Alpha in prisons on re-offending behaviour. There are so many complicated variables, and Alpha guests in prisons are often involved with a number of Christian workers from various organizations and in a number of courses, initiatives and programmes, such as Kainos, so it would be difficult to isolate the Alpha factor and also find a comparable control group for research.⁸

Research findings

Questionnaires were sent to all the listed 139 HMP institutions in England and Wales. Chaplains, including assistant chaplains, returned fifty two forms. Five e-mails were sent, mainly explaining why they had not completed the form; one telephone message also explained that the form would not be completed, as they had no Alpha course.

Forty two members of chaplaincy teams commented on running an Alpha course in prison. The overall worth of Alpha in prison was rated as excellent by nine respondents, very good by eighteen, good by eight, satisfactory by four, unsatisfactory by two and poor by just one. One response was mixed, based on four courses, of which two were rated excellent, one satisfactory and one worthless.

The main positive aspect of the Alpha course was its good outline of the Christian faith (mentioned in eighteen responses). Its good, nonthreatening atmosphere was mentioned in seven responses, and also its way of challenging attitudes. It was valued as a tool for facilitating discussion (six responses), helping in discussing problems, and providing time to reflect (both five responses).

The main negative aspect was related to problems in fitting the course into the regime, particularly as guests were transferred before completing the course. Concerning improvements, ten respondents wanted a dedicated prison video course and fifteen asked for shorter talks. Thirteen considered that the course needed to be better adapted to a prison context.

I was able to follow up the questionnaires with visits to prisons, and by telephone conversations. I received helpful advice from three HMP Chaplaincy staff, who are located in the same building where I work, and I have interviewed them as part of my qualitative research. The questionnaire was designed to identify the prisons that had run an Alpha course and to elicit views and comments on Alpha and the experience in their prison context. It did in some cases pick up some negative views on Alpha and reasons why it is not available in a particular prison.

Charismatic issues were not mentioned at all in the questionnaire, but did come up during interviews, particularly with HMP Chaplaincy as they are aware of certain problems. Confidentiality has been an issue in several cases outside of this questionnaire. I have been asked not to attribute some criticisms of Alpha with regard to the charismatic events called 'slaying in the Spirit'. I have also certainly not identified the institution where it occurred. It raises security legitimate issues and could lead to an internal investigation. In two cases the chaplain was lying on the floor, and therefore vulnerable to an attack and being easily overpowered so that the keys could be removed. In one case the chaplain was female and the position in a men's prison seems highly inappropriate.

One person did not want his criticisms of Alpha recorded or attributed. He felt that Alpha is very over-rated and has a limited role to play, though the Chaplaincy and Prison Service official line seems to be too accommodating and concessive to the Alphacrats, the people behind Alpha who are developing its role and place in prisons.

In other words Alpha has too much influence and time allowed to operate in prisons.

In some cases I sensed that the chaplains resented the attitude and almost arrogant assumptions of some Alpha team members and leaders. In one particular case, an Alpha leader gave the impression that the Alpha team could sort out and solve a particular person's serious problems by their ministry when, in fact, he had been ministered to over a period of more than six months without success and had been offered Alpha courses and Christian ministry. Sometimes the chaplains are offended and grieved by insensitive Christians who give the strong impression, or may even say, that the Chaplain is not doing the job properly and has failed. They, as guests and volunteers, have come to put everything right, preach the true Gospel, and even get

results, genuine conversions, and bring healing and deliverance. Chaplains generally vet and check volunteer workers, but insensitive and self-important volunteers inevitably get in to prisons.

Some Chaplains will not work with volunteers who are not really interested in the prisoner and working alongside the Chaplain and his team, but are solely interested in conversions and proclaiming their brand of Christianity. Quite a number of chaplains can tell stories of volunteers causing harm, considerable embarrassment and acting stupidly in a prison context.

However, my research shows that volunteers, including outside teams, play a very important role in delivering the Alpha course. Only one institution mentioned that no outside help was used. Outside volunteers took the lead at eleven institutions. They are jointly involved at 18 institutions. It is acknowledged by HMP Chaplaincy and prison chaplains that Alpha could not be delivered without the help of outside volunteers. The Prison Service is likely to continue to support and to encourage this arrangement because it keeps spiralling costs down and helps take some pressure off a much stretched service. Government policy is firmly committed to community involvement in public services and the Criminal Justice System. Many community based projects and new initiatives are receiving generous funding.

During my research I came across some perceptive criticisms of Alpha by a former prison chaplain. He believed that Alpha allowed the prisoner to be passive and not involved in the course. The basic philosophy of Alpha is not to be confrontational and to allow the course guest to participate on their own terms, in their own way and at their own speed, provided that is not disruptive or destructive. If a guest does not wish to speak or share their views then there should be no pressure on them to change their attitude or behaviour. A person could therefore go through the whole Alpha course like an observer, without saying a word and just passively listening to everything, not really engaging or making any positive contribution. This former chaplain argued that the Prison Fellowship's *Sycamore Tree* course was better because the prisoners had to participate and engage; they had to answer certain questions and face up to the consequences of their crimes. When on the course, they cannot remain or become passive observers, but in the groups they are directed to be active participants who look at their offending behaviour, attitudes, lifestyle, and then work out strategies to change and seek restorative justice. Prison Fellowship defines Restorative Justice (RJ) as 'a systematic response to crime that emphasises the repairing

of harm caused or revealed by criminal behaviour. The aim of justice should be to restore victims, offenders and their communities by seeking to repair the injuries caused by crime and reconcile all those affected'.⁹ Sycamore Tree is, in the words of Prison Fellowship, 'a powerful and challenging course for offenders which addresses offending behaviour using Restorative Justice principles. It explores the attitude of offenders and victims towards each other, and the need for forgiveness, restoration and restitution'.¹⁰

In July 2003 the Government launched its consultation document on RJ strategy¹¹ wanting to ensure that effective RJ programmes are available at all stages of the criminal justice system. Sycamore Tree is mentioned in the document:

*Offenders are encouraged to think about the impact of their crime on the victim, for example through Sycamore Tree courses run by Prison Fellowship in thirty four prisons in 2002.*¹²

Prison Fellowship has in fact helped in the development of the Compass Project programme at Highpoint Prison. Over twenty-two weeks the prisoners were able to 'examine, understand, test and apply a Christian values-based lifestyle'.

Alpha and Sycamore Tree do not have to be seen as in any way mutually exclusive, but they can be complementary courses depending on the stage of the prisoner's spiritual journey and development. Sometimes administrative and internal prison arrangements dictate when the prisoner can go on the respective course, but prisoners do choose to go on both courses. The aims are different and in no way conflict or even overlap, though there are arguments and demands to bring RJ material and ideas into the Alpha for Prisons course, particularly during the group discussion sessions. Currently there is not any specific material on RJ in the Alpha for Prisons course, though some chaplains and volunteers would argue that for there to be authentic repentance and conversion RJ issues, such as forgiveness, restoration and restitution, cannot be avoided.

Alpha for Prisons is sensitive to criticisms of its core content. It has produced video material directly relevant to prisoners and criminals, mainly based on personal testimony that touches on RJ issues. Both Sycamore Tree/Prison Fellowship and Alpha for Prisons are aiming to touch prisoners' lives in order to break the cycle of crime and patterns of re-offending.

Beyond the Prison Walls

Alpha and Prison Fellowship both have ministries that extend beyond the courses and custodial sentences. Both recruit and train volunteers to go into prisons to run the courses and to help prisoners released from penal institutions by helping the prisoners to tackle problems in re-integrating into the community and finding a supportive church family.

Reverend Paul Cowley, who is head of the Alpha for Prisons ministry, admitted that in the early days there were many failures. Some were down to the Alpha team's naivety. For example, Cowley honestly admits that the Alpha office thought that the newly released offender merely had to consult a copy of *Alpha News* that then printed a list of all the churches running an Alpha course and select a church of his (or her) choice and simply turn up and all would be well. The exoffender expected a warm welcome, encouragement and helpful Christian support. The reality, however, was very different. Most churches find the prospect, let alone the reality, of a former criminal turning up on a Sunday morning daunting and disorientating. The exoffender, likewise, often finds the services almost incomprehensible, very strange and couched in language that is almost alien and odd; then people in the congregation can seem intimidating, aloof, ultra reserved and sometimes suspicious and even mildly hostile. Regular Christian church goers do not often appreciate the cultural shift that ex-offenders have to go through, even though they might have seen the Alpha videos, attended chapel frequently, and met Alpha leaders and volunteers. Sometimes the transition process is harder than expected. In a new church environment the ex-offender is isolated and among total strangers. He might feel it is easier to burgle their homes than spend much time in their churches or with them after the service; they probably have so little in common. This is a particularly wide Alpha gap, and it needs a lot of effort on all sides to remove it.

One expert in the field of helping former sex offenders said that he was not aware of one sex offender who had been helped through the Alpha course. He could not put me in touch with one former sex offender who had been on an Alpha course. (There are a number of reasons for this however.) Yet the Alpha manual gives advice and guidance on working with sex offenders. They have very little actual experience of helping such people. Generally they are helped by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and the Circles of Support and Accountability often run by Quakers, not by Alpha. That is not to say that Alpha does not and cannot help them, but they do not have the expertise,

the specialist skills or experience. I would question if they need to get involved when other organizations can do a much better job. I really think that they are ill advised to work in this field and trying to place former sex offenders with churches needs very careful handling. It can go disastrously wrong, especially as sex offenders are known to target churches as they have Sunday Schools and youth groups. Churches offer many opportunities to the predatory sex offender and the 'groomer'. They also quite often have some rather naïve, friendly and gullible people who generously offer hospitality, contact with children and scope for offending. Criminals have frequently conned church people in a number of ways. The majority of sex offenders, estimated at over sixty per cent according to research carried out by Kent Police, were found to have had church connections and most of them were frequent churchgoers. From my experience of taking services in prisons, some of the most frequent chapel goers and active Christians in a prison context were sex offenders. On reflection Alpha should refer the former sex offender to other organizations. But they are able to play a low-key role in finding a church under the guidance of expert advice. Alpha can use *Sanctuary* and *Circles of Support* to monitor the behaviour of such an offender. To expect a church to cope without support could spell tragedy.

The Langley House Trust has been operating since 1958 in helping to provide a Christian ethos and accommodation for ex-offenders. It has received millions of pounds in Home Office grant funding on various projects and has considerable experience in dealing with some of the most difficult released prisoners and high-risk cases. Prison Fellowship (PF) has far more experience in working with prisoners and ex-offenders. One key advantage Alpha has over many organizations in this field is a very impressive database of Churches, potential volunteers and supporters.

When there are a number of organizations providing good post custody accommodation and Christian support for ex-offenders, it worth asking the question why has Alpha joined in. There is a desperate need, but would it not be better to support and develop the existing organizations and agencies rather than create a new one? When there is Prison Fellowship (PF) do we really need Alpha getting involved in the care of ex-offenders? Would it not be more productive for Alpha to let PF do this work? There does seem to be an unproductive overlap and a number of organizations all competing for Government funding of their particular projects. Part of the answer lies in Alpha's way of operating and its desire for control and protecting its investment.

The Alpha Caring for Ex-Offenders aims at re-integrating those just released from prison into society through the local church. Although it uses the church as a resource, particularly the vast army of available volunteers at its disposal, it also employs non-religious methodologies to achieve favourable and lasting outcomes, for example, the provision of accommodation, employment, mentors, and positive support from volunteers. As a relatively latecomer to the Alpha scheme of enterprises, it is still in the process of establishing its network of churches, volunteers and links with relevant organizations. There is an apparent gap between those completing the Alpha course and the thousands leaving prison without church and Christian connections.

The situation needs to be seen against a wider context of Christian ministry, as other organizations with much more experience, expertise and specialist skills have an established track record of helping ex-offenders adapt to life outside the prison walls.

One of the factors in the success of the Alpha Caring for Ex- Offenders ministry lies in the visible profile of HTB. HTB promotes an image of success, wealth and willingness to help. To a needy and desperate prisoner, soon to be released from custody, Alpha for Prisons and the Caring for Ex-Offenders must seem like a very worthwhile option and attractive proposition. HTB is perceived as a wealthy church, probably the wealthiest in the country, in a very wealthy area. It does not take much thought to work out that such a church could be the answer to his or her immediate needs: financial assistance, accommodation, work, friendship and even a safety net to help if things go wrong. HTB through its Alpha Caring for Ex-Offenders programme appears to offer a great deal. In the prisoner's mind it would be worth a try to see how much could be gained by literally signing up to the Alpha programme. It could therefore pay to play along and take what is on offer.

It appears that some who have chosen this path have done well. They have had lots of attention, elements of fame (by appearing in the Alpha videos and publicity material), and the provision of work, accommodation, and plenty of support. There is good anecdotal evidence of HTB/Alpha providing a genuine safety net and help when things have gone wrong for the ex-offender. For example, when an offender committed further offences HTB tried to help the offender through the situation and offered to have him back on release from prison. Although he betrayed their trust, he was given the opportunity to return. He was not written off when he re-offended more

than twice. HTB were prepared to forgive him and help him to start again. Obviously they would have put certain restrictions and agreements in place to stop him re-offending but he was able to come back.

Many churches are very fearful about receiving ex-offenders, particularly sexual offenders. Some would like to help but they feel that they owe it to their flock, the financial supporters and willing workers, that the reception and welcome of former offenders, criminal elements, and socially undesirable would inevitably disturb the smooth running of church life. It seems that the very essence and heart of the Christian Gospel is overlooked when the church turns its back on the outcast, the stranger, the poor, the alienated, the criminal and the afflicted.

Alpha regularly runs a 'Caring for Ex-offenders Conference'. This conference is designed to help churches and volunteers understand the many difficulties facing prisoners on release, the pitfalls and problems of helping them to settle, to find work, to handle finances, accommodation and a supportive church. Government research has identified nine key factors that influence re-offending:

- Education
- Employment
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Mental and physical health
- Attitudes and self control
- Institutionalisation and life skills
- Housing
- Financial support and debt
- Family networks

Prison Fellowship and Alpha are acutely aware of these issues and are therefore developing strategies through their volunteers to set up support and networks, sometimes called circles of support, to help the ex-offender to adjust and overcome these many serious problems. Some churches have therefore set up a programme or support network to monitor and support the ex-offender, particularly through the early stages of his life outside of prison.

Therefore a church would set in place a programme to ensure that they are aware of the offender's needs and the key factors influencing his or her life. In some cases there has to be a responsible risk assessment and evaluation of what can realistically be offered to the ex-offender. This is particularly

necessary in dealing with former sex offenders, who might be inadvertently be given close and open access to children, young people and other vulnerable people at church or in the home. Some well meaning church members may offer these exoffenders accommodation or introduce them to Sunday School and Youth groups without thinking of the temptations, dangers and possible consequences. With some offenders it can mean thinking about other temptations, particularly when alcoholics or former thieves are put in positions where there is easy access to supplies of alcohol, cash and other valuables. Alcoholics and sex offenders have a daily struggle to overcome their problems as they are never completely cured.

Churches therefore now have rules and regulations that prohibit convicted sex offenders from working with children and young people and even holding office in the church. While some may argue that it against the spirit and essence of Christianity that preaches conversion and a new life in Christ, nevertheless Christian leaders should be above reproach; the risks are too great to allow certain people carte blanche and complete access to children and the vulnerable. The needs and witness of the Christian community should be taken into account. Unfortunately in our society a person can easily change their identity and move far away from their past associations and begin a new life where they are open and able to commit their former crimes. Churches are right to insist on criminal record and background checks and appropriate declarations by those seeking responsible positions.

Theological issues

There are theological concerns relating to the Alpha course. The following main doctrinal criticisms, some would say weaknesses, have been clearly identified: the sacraments, ecclesiology, God/Trinity, pneumatology, charismata, demonology, the theory of the atonement, fundamentalist tendencies, and social ethics. Alpha is, therefore, said to be deficient in these areas, and some would argue flawed to the point of being unhelpful and harmful. There are some critics, particularly those who have vented their ire on the Internet, that dismiss Alpha theology as false doctrine that has corrupted the true Gospel message. There is also the whole ecumenical debate that has heated up over the last few years as Alpha has forged much closer links with the Roman Catholic Church.

There is also debate among theologians on whether the Alpha course is a spiritual form of McDonald's, a pre-packaged and one size fits all approach to evangelism. The McDonaldization debate has been applied to the Alpha

phenomenon and there has been discussion in terms of the McDonaldisation process – efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Pete Ward’s seminal journal article *Alpha – the McDonaldisation of Religion* played a very important role in the debate, as it was the first serious and well articulated work on the subject.¹³

Final Reflections

The basic Alpha formula of a shared meal, a talk and discussion session has proved to be a great success and can work very well in a prison context, especially when the prison governor allows the shared meal to take place; this can help break down barriers and may prepare the inmate participants for a more worthwhile experience and better fellowship.

I would argue that the most important aspect is the discussion session because it helps the participant to explore and articulate their concerns, struggles and problems. Through the discussions they can develop their understanding and grow spiritually. In prisons, chaplains and volunteers are working hard to provide considerable spiritual nourishment, a good spiritual diet for very needy people. Alpha only claims to be an introduction, and to take the food analogy further, it is only a starter and not a main course. Many criticisms of Alpha seem to evaluate Alpha as if it were a complete theology. Alpha should be seen as starting point and not a destination. While this limits its scope and influence, it can nevertheless put people in the right direction, on the right track. When evaluating Alpha, people often do not take into account the place of the discussion sessions. They can represent over one third of the course, and according to the context they can be far more influential than the talk or the official

Alpha teaching. While Alpha can be a simplified product for many participants, it may not be necessarily so. In the discussions the participants have the opportunity to engage in challenging the Alpha position and any simplified diet that may be offered.

References

- 1 Stephen Hunt (2001), *Anyone for Alpha? Evangelism in a Post-Christian Society*. London:DLT. p.33.
- 2 Mark Ireland (2000), *A Study in the Effectiveness of Process Evangelism Courses in the Diocese of Lichfield, with Special Reference to Alpha*. Unpublished dissertation. p. 10.

- 3 Ireland (2000) p.10. See also Mike Booker and Mark Ireland (2003), *Evangelism — which way now?* London: Church House.
- 4 This information was given verbally at an Alpha Conference in November 2003. Part of Michael Emmett's story is reported in Alpha News, issue 32, March — June 2004, p. 4.
- 5 For examples see *An Introduction to Alpha for Prisons and Caring for Ex-Offenders*, London: HTB, 2002, p. 3 & 8. Alpha News, issue 30, March-June 2003, pp. 4–5 and issue 33, March — June 2004, p. 5.
- 6 *An Introduction* (2002) p. 2.
- 7 Information supplied by the Resettlement Officer of Alpha Caring for Ex-Offenders at HTB in an email.
- 8 See the research report on Kainos Community, Jonathan Burnside et al. (2001). www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/-kainos_finalrep.pdf
- 9 Prison Fellowship News, November 2002 – February 2003, p.1.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *Restorative justice: the Government's strategy*. London: Home Office, 2003. Available at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/victims/restorative/index.html
- 12 *ibid.*, p.19.
- 13 Pete Ward, Alpha — The McDonaldization of Religion, in *Anvil* Vol. 15, Number 4, 1998, pp279 – 286.

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Questionnaire results

Q1

How would you assess the overall worth of the Alpha course in your prison?

Please tick only one box.

Excellent course	9 responses
Very good	18 responses
Good	8 responses
Satisfactory	4 responses
Unsatisfactory	2 responses
Poor	1
Worthless	

Further comments

One mixed response based on four courses: 2 excellent, 1 satisfactory and 1 worthless. This answer evaluated the attitude and response of the inmates.

43 respondents rated the running of an Alpha course in prison.

Q2

What do you consider to be the positive aspects of the Alpha course in your prison?

Some gave several aspects.

Good outline of the Christian faith	mentioned in 18 responses
Challenges attitudes	mentioned in 7 responses
Good, non-threatening environment	7
Good tool for facilitating discussion	6
Helps discuss problems	5
Time to reflect	5
Changes lives	4
Builds relationships	3
Provides fellowship	3

Q3

What do you consider to be the negative aspects of the Alpha course in your prison?

Some gave several aspects.

Regime problems, including transfers before completing the course

24 responses (10 related to the transfer problems)

Video talks too long	mentioned in 10 responses
Too rigid and prescriptive	9 responses
Too middle class	mentioned in 7 responses
Course too long	mentioned in 6 responses
Too evangelical	mentioned in 4 responses
Too wordy, language too difficult	4 responses
Assumes too much prior knowledge	3 responses
Sessions too long	3 responses
No negative aspects	3 responses

Q4

Are there any improvements or amendments to the course that you would like to see?

Shorter talks	15 responses
Dedicated prison video course	10 responses
Needs to be adapted, more prison friendly	13 responses
Sharing of meal/food to be allowed	3 responses

Q5

How many Alpha courses have you run in prisons?

(44 have had experience of running an Alpha course)

Over 20	2 responses
15-20	4 responses
10-14	5 responses
5-9	15 responses
1-4	18 responses
None	First planned

Q6

Of the prisoners on the Alpha courses, how many do you think claim a conversion experience or a significant change in their life as a result of Alpha?

Most of them	9 (one response refers specifically to changes not conversion)
Some of them	15 (the above respondent also refers to conversion)
A few of them	7 responses
Very few of them	13 responses
None of them	2 responses

Further comments

One chaplaincy team who did not run Alpha doubted conversions allegedly experienced through Alpha.

Four out of the ten Methodists thought that most course members claimed conversions/life changes.

Q7

Does Alpha work alongside, or independently from, the Chaplaincy Team?

All 42 responses stated alongside.

Q8

Is the course compatible with the general direction of the Chaplaincy Team?

31 said that it was compatible. 5 revealed tensions within the team.

6 expressed reservations. One said it was not compatible.

Q9

Do Chaplains or an outside team lead the programme, and does it make any difference who leads?

18 said both were involved in leading.

11 had outside teams leading.

11 had chaplains leading.

4 preferred outsiders leading.

4 said that it made no difference who leads.

3 maintained that chaplaincy involvement was important.

Q10

In your opinion, how does Alpha compare with other programmes?

12 thought that Alpha compared very well with other programmes.

6 thought it was as good as other programmes.

11 thought Alpha was the best.

10 preferred other programmes, including 3 who preferred Emmaus.

2 said that Alpha was more rigid than others.

Christian denomination or religious affiliation.

Church of England	33
Roman Catholic	1
Methodist	10
Others	
Pentecostal	1
Salvation Army	1
Congregational	1
Ecumenical	1
Church in Wales	1