

# Colin Davey - A Further Reflection on the Alpha Course - at its Conclusion

*In the middle of April, in the middle of the course, one of the participants, Colin Davey, offered some observations on his experiences thus far. Now that it has concluded, he has written the article below.*

Now that the Alpha Course has finished, I hope you're wondering whether it was worthwhile. Well, here's an update to the halftime report of a few weeks back that offers some further thoughts on that very subject. Once again, it's a personal view very much enriched by discussions with my fellow participants. As to value, I'll leave you to make up your own mind.

To kick off, I think it's fair to say that we're not the target audience. [*We, being the parishioners of our two parishes who were invited onto the course/signed up for it, with the intention that it deepen both our faith and our community*] Rather, Alpha aims to attract new recruits, and handsome young ones at that, judging by the vox poppers and the live audience we see listening to Nicky [*Gumbel – of Holy Trinity, Brompton, Anglican Church in London, the creator of the course*] as he preaches on his home turf. Young people are what's needed for the Church to not only survive but also to thrive, so it's sensible to focus evangelism there. No religion can live by wise old folk alone, so let's get the youthful and inquisitive in through the door. The videos are certainly dynamic and visually appealing with that audience in mind, which goes some way to explaining why, as previously noted, superactive globetrotting co-hosts Gemma and Toby just won't keep still. For someone curious about the Church this is indeed a great way in – you don't even need to suffer a personal crisis first – and Alpha will answer all those big questions you'll likely have, distil out all your uncertainty, grind away your reservations. Listen up handsome young enquirers, Church can be cool, jump in, yes right in at the deep end, and trust!

The approach might seem a bit alienating at first, but stick with it past the first few videos and one soon discovers that the reach is in fact broad, ecumenical and inclusive, with controversy carefully avoided, and nothing too 'old school' beyond emphasizing the sanctity of marriage. Despite the overrepresentation of youngsters on screen, within that demographic there's a decent attempt to spread the net of diversity wide, and the unguarded views of these vox poppers are at turns fresh, bemusing and heartfelt. Consequently, Alpha feels welcoming. And that's a key take-home message: that we're each truly loved by Jesus, always welcome, always accepted. Come on in, and stay.

But we're not beginners, so what's in it for us? Surely Alpha is literally preaching to the converted? Well, faith is undoubtedly a perpetual journey (we're back to that enormous carbon footprint of Gemma and Toby again) and there are always new opportunities to

learn and strengthen as well as to question and review. In one sense Alpha is a refresher, but it's also much more than that. The Alpha Course is laser-focussed on establishing and developing a personal relationship with God. That's the core message running through all Nicky's monologues. In fact, that's what it's ALL about. Everything else – be it prayer in all its forms, service and scripture in all their richness, Church in all its denominations, parish community in all its diversity – is prompt, support and guidance towards that one goal. You don't even need to know the words. And that is important too because the formality and process of Catholicism might not only be an obstacle to new enquirers (hence RCIA), but may also bring our relationship with the institution, rather than with God, to centre stage: there's a risk that Jesus becomes a friend of a friend, someone we met at Church. Alpha prompts us to consider rebalancing that dynamic, to make that relationship more direct, more personal. We each hold our glass to God's living room wall, listen, and wonder. Nicky just rings the front doorbell.

The benefit to us of a course like this is also clearly evidenced in the discussions that follow each video. I cannot overemphasize what a privilege it has been to listen to my fellow parishioners. There's tremendous wisdom and insight in their varied viewpoints and experiences, prompted by the key questions posed by Alpha and guided by the discussion leaders, not to mention a great deal of humour. One cannot help but feel closer to God, having heard His impact on others' lives and outlooks. The one-day retreat at St David's in Dalkeith was especially impactful in this sense, as we discussed the Holy Spirit, its nature (no right or wrong answer here as far as I can see) and the very positive effect of our various encounters with it/him/her, a guiding presence to call upon and stand beside us in times of everyday need and extraordinary challenge.

Although I can't claim to have been transformed by Alpha, and won't be heading out on the streets any time soon with my salvation board and beard, the experience has undoubtedly been positive. It's easy to be dismissive, sceptical, suspicious even of such initiatives, but if you can approach it with an open mind, then that attitude will also help you to take what you need from the course, even if that's 'only' new friends. Crucially, Alpha is very different to what we're used to, and it's vital to be challenged now and again in order to bring out hidden nuance and meaning in ourselves and others, to react, share and connect. As such, I think Alpha has helped highlight our existing values as individuals and as a community, just as much as showing us things anew. I hope that the Alpha Course continues to set many people, of all ages, on their personal journey of faith, to find their own brand of peace and acceptance: my boat is your boat, my captain is your captain, but your oar is your own.

As Gemma and Toby finally screech to a halt, it only remains for me to thank once again, on behalf of all the participants, those who thoughtfully and kindly organised, guided and looked after us throughout. We emerge, on many levels, filled. I now know how many sandwiches I can pack into 30 minutes while talking. Surely it's been worth it just for that.