

The Alpha Course? In our school?

By Maxine Mackintosh

I know I am not alone when I say the posters, business cards and general publicity boom of the Alpha course around school is alarming. Posters stating “Is this it? (tick the appropriate box)” give off an image suggesting open discussion, not full on evangelism, which is in reality, what the Alpha Course is really about.

I am not stating that the Alpha course in the school is a 10 week quick conversion recipe, yet my one experience certainly confirms that, though many regular attendees have told me it is not so, but this is definitely the case outside school: A quarter of a million agnostics have “found God” through the course in England, with 2 million people having attended in the UK and 13 million worldwide across 112 countries. Figures like these bring to my attention, not the happy, warm informal “discussion” group, but the very well organised evangelical goal of the course.

The Alpha course started in the 1970s as a small Christian discussion group but took off worldwide in the 90s under Nick Gumbel. By the time Nick Gumbel was done with it, it was run like a major corporation, using advertising, and a whole range of well-known psychological tactics. The course is run with military precision, and is finely targeted. There are courses for children, soldiers, prisoners, adults etc. so that every group is exposed to what works best for them.

The cost of advertising alone must run into millions. Besides the posters we see around school, there are banners on the sides of buses, big displays in the underground, and many billboards, some quite enormous ones like the one on the Hammersmith flyover in London! So one can only conclude that this is not about a simple “discussion” group. Firstly this is very much about aggressively promoting the Christian faith, and secondly about promoting an image and tone which the course does not fulfil, in fact does the complete opposite.

The running of the course, how liberal/extreme it is, is up to the people running it. However one thing the courses do have in common are the well-known psychological tools used: people are split off into small groups, easier to control and creating a sense of a close-knit family, and are expected to talk about quite personal aspects of their lives which has the effect of creating an

increased sense of trust in the group. The discussion groups are often structured like a traditional family with a man and a woman as 'leaders'. Free food is

provided generating the association of comfort with religion. Music is frequently used, as sounds are a well-known stimulus for mood change. Each course contains enough devoted Christians dispersed amongst the agnostics that when half the room starts to do something, many of the rest will do the same, for example praying.

Then the best tactic comes around week 7 or 8 of the 10 week course: the weekend away, I assume the trip to Iona at Easter is this part of the course. Take a bunch of people away for a weekend where they will be trapped, a totally captive audience, with little to do other than what you organise for them. It sounds cynical, but the trip to Iona will be a "pilgrimage" as advertised, with increasing pressure on the agnostics to do as the Christians do, which is praising the Lord.

There is also a cult element in the course, as at some point, participants are urged to allow the holy spirit to fill them up by speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and one woman claimed to have "dropped to the ground making grunting animal noises".

I feel an institution like the Alpha Course has no place in a school, especially its advertising. So next Friday, before you go to the course, just think about what the course represents. You are supporting an institution that has a "90% success rate of conversion", largely due to sophisticated psychological techniques designed to manipulate you.

Maxine is 16 and attends a school in Oxford. This article was published in her school magazine.