

Visit the local burger dispensary in any university town and you'll be sure to meet a queue of red-eyed 19-year-olds ordering fodder for an all-nighter, whether of the essay writing or herbal variety. But recently, a group of students at a Cambridge branch of McDonalds have been offering their peers a little more than some fries and a drink with their burger. And top of their new and improved menu? Eternal salvation and a relationship with God.

For those involved, this is less meal deal, more The Real Deal. McDonalds is just one of nine locations across Cambridge to have played host – unknowingly perhaps – to Alpha for Students, a satellite branch of the hugely successful Alpha Course which is running in more than 7,000 churches nationwide.

A programme of 10 weekly talks designed to introduce non-Christians to the central tenets of Christianity over an informal meal, Alpha has been running in various formats for more than 25 years. But since its redesign in the early 90s, by Nicky Gumbel – a former lawyer, now curate at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) in Kensington – Alpha has developed a wider public profile and a marketing machine to match.

Posters, banners and flies have been plastered everywhere from billboards to the back of buses and nowhere is Alpha's presence growing faster than on campus. According to Alpha's own literature, courses are now running in 67 per cent of British universities and the latest edition of the quarterly Alpha News cites a report from the independent organisation, Christian Research, which found a 160 per cent rise in the number of churches involved with Alpha for Students from 2003 to 2004.

The success story began in 1998 when a Christian student decided to run the standard Alpha Course from her university bedroom. While both Christian Unions and local churches have since become involved, the original model has proved to be a successful format, according to Jamie Haith, the HTB curate who heads up Alpha for Students nationwide.

"Someone will say, 'Look, I've got this material. Let's watch these videos and we'll just chat about it over a pizza,'" explains Haith. "That's why Alpha is so perfect for students because it's what they're doing anyway. They sit around eating together, talking about religion or politics, and this gives them something to bounce off." Haith, 36, first came to HTB in 1992 and remembers photocopying the original Alpha manuals where the course consisted of just eight people.

"The whole thing has been demand driven," he says. "It's not that Nicky Gumbel woke up one day and decided, 'I'm going to take Alpha to the world.'"

Nevertheless, Alpha's evangelical ambition has grown. "We would like to introduce the Alpha Course into every university and college of higher education so that every student has the opportunity to attend an Alpha course", reads the internal Alpha for Students mission statement. And while the course may be publicised as 'a practical introduction to the Christian faith', leaders at ground level are trained to introduce their guests 'into' that faith. If Christians are fishers of men, then Alpha is their ultimate rod.

And there are fish enough to catch. "In London alone there are one million students that live within the M25 and you're looking at less than 1 per cent with any Christian expression of worship," says Haith. "It's a massively – I don't like the term – unchurched generation." Church with a capital C is, in Haith's view, a major stumbling block for those approaching the Christian faith.

Barry Dwyer, tutor in Marketing and Advertising at the London College of Communication, would agree. In marketing terms, he says, the Church of England is like all major religions "a damaged brand". Alpha's success relies heavily on distancing itself from that fallout. "It's not only what they are branding, it's also what they're not branding," Dwyer suggests.

Alpha's main tagline – 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life' – has no mention of Jesus, God or religion. "We're supposed to be in a post-modern generation who don't believe in truth, or that there is one god," says Jamie Haith. "We say that what is true for you is not necessarily true for me. But what I believe the gospels say is, come on, explore God and get in the way a bit."

But getting people there in the first place is the challenge, says Gavin Shuker, who coordinated Alpha for Students in Cambridge this year. Shuker, 23, graduated from Girton College in 2003 with a degree in Social and Political Sciences and now heads up the south-east division of FUSION, a national Christian initiative for students which works in partnership with Alpha. According to Shuker, the obstacles facing course leaders range from a general sense of apathy and the call of Playstation in some environments to the overcrowded timetables and anti-Christian meeting bias he encounters in Cambridge.

"A serious consideration for us when we put out publicity about Alpha was that 'a short talk and some food' is like shorthand for bible-bashing in Cambridge," he says. The approach of the Cambridge Christian Union, suggest Shuker, has traditionally been quite conservative and intellectual. "The CU provides Friday lunchtime talks that are essentially a theological lecture on Christianity. People go to that and often feel overwhelmed."

In reaction to this Calvinistic approach, the joint launch night for Cambridge's nine Alpha for Students courses was held at The Fez, a souk-styled nightclub. "For someone who has had no experience of Christianity before, the idea of turning up at a church can be quite daunting," explains Shuker. "We wanted to use a neutral venue that wasn't linked to church in any way." Management at The Fez was initially reluctant to host a Christian evening but agreed when Shuker promised them a crowd of at least 200.

On the night, 220 students attended. A representative from HTB gave the standard Alpha introductory talk: 'Christianity: Boring, Irrelevant and Untrue?' and a specially made video was played which addressed the question of why less people than ever are attending church. According to Shuker, guests enjoyed the talk as well as the bard and stayed on as the evening dovetailed into an existing club night. But he is realistic about the event's success, viewing it as an initial stake in the ground. "No one is going to listen to the talk and think, 'Yes, I'm going to give my life to the Lord'," he admits. "But if they leave having had a good time, then they might consider coming on the Alpha Course and that's really a win."

Those at Alpha HQ openly encourages these creative initiatives. The A-Z of Running Alpha for Students had designated chapters entitled 'Publicity Strategies' and 'Playing with the Packaging'. Invitations and beer mats printed with the Alpha mantra are available in packs of 200 and Vicki Walker, a course leader at the University of Surrey even improvised by handing out cans of baked beans – a student staple – to first years, with Alpha logos replacing the original labels.

Freshers' Week is generally viewed as the best opportunity to attract large numbers onto the course, particularly as it ties in with Alpha's annual 'Invitation', a national advertising campaign run each September. As Jamie Haith sees it: "Students are at a key time in their lives when they're working out who they really are. They're away from home, most of them for the first time, with all this new-found freedom and independence, new ways of thinking, massive pressures upon them personally – loneliness, debt – and they are thinking, 'Where am I going in life?'"

What does he make of criticism that Alpha is dangerous precisely because it targets students at this vulnerable time? Rather than meeting the question head on, Haith sidesteps the issue. "Jesus talked to everybody," he says, and points to various part of the New Testament in which the Son of God addresses not only the weak and crippled, but also with power, money and influence. For Jesus, asserts Haith, "it doesn't matter where people are in their lives – whether they feel a need for God, they're crying out for him or they're thinking, 'No thank you very much!'"

"No thank you very much" is a message issuing loud and clear from certain student quarters. In a letter to the University of Bristol's student newspaper Epigram, a first year geographer, Nicholas Barnett, complains that the recruitment policies of both the Bristol CU and Alpha for Students has left him feeling harassed and threatened. Particularly objectionable to Barnett is the quote on Alpha posters: 'Those who stand for nothing, fall for anything'. "This is quite simply offensive in my opinion and their tacit suggestion that those who do not believe in the word of God are likely to wander the path of depravity is bordering on intolerance of other religions," Barnett writes.

Such a reaction saddens Gavin Shuker in Cambridge, where each autumn Varsity and The Cambridge Student are similarly filled with letters of complaint. "The nature of the gospel can be inherently offensive to some people's sensibilities, but I think that more than 99 per cent of the time it's Christians that are really offensive," Shuker says. He believes it falls to Christian students to evangelise above all with friendship. While at Girton, he helped organise chill-out cafés during exam time and his student cell group delivered little packs filled with chocolate, coffee and stress-relieving bubble wrap to all the rooms in college. "We'd put in a little card saying, 'To God, you are much more important than your exams. We're just letting you know that we're praying for you,'" recalls Shuker.

"It's the difference between an experiential version of Christianity and a straight down the line, lecture version," he says, and Haith agrees. "It's a desire that the whole person will be impacted, and not just the head."

To achieve that impact, ground level mission work coordinated with a structured central marketing strategy. At Invitation time each year, course leaders are sent a booklet detailing Alpha's PR and advertising guidelines. This exhaustive document – drawn up by Alpha press office and former journalist Mark Eldson-Dew – covers everything from the best times to phone a local journalist to achieving the most attractive photos of your Alpha events. Registered as a charity since 2001, Alpha does not produce promotional merchandise to sell because it does not want to be viewed as a commercial organisation. But Alpha International's annual returns for 2003 show that sales of course resources alone reached £736,761, while expenditure on publications, marketing and communications totalled more than £1.2 million.

"These are big figures by any measure," says marketing man Barry Dwyer. "The charity of not-for-profit sector has reluctantly been forced to become as market-orientated as a Plc." In some respects, Dwyer says, their practices are even more commercial. As well as developing brand awareness, Alpha has recognised the huge value of word-of-mouth advertising. The majority of people who attend an Alpha course are there because they have received a personal invitation from a newly-converted friend, colleague or family member.

"No one is here to make Alpha great," insists Haith. "It just so happens that at the moment, God seems to be using Alpha as a tool for evangelism. We're not here to sell you anything or to make you become anything. We just want to support people with the work they're already doing." With that in mind, Haith is currently preparing for the annual Alpha for Students conference in September when he will welcome around 400 UK course leaders for two days of training and prayer at HTB. Next March, he will travel to a student conference in Kyrgyzstan and work has already begun on translating the course resources into Russian and Korean.

Is Haith ultimately comfortable with this multi-national marketing and missionary mix? "In the modern world, when you're looking at the Bible with one eye and at the world with the other, it can be hard to balance it all," he concedes. "What's important is that it's not just words; it's not just glitzy stuff; that there's substance to it.

"Alpha may be criticised by some for being the McDonalds of Christianity," Haith admits. "The difference is that the food we serve up is actually good for you."

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