

Exploring the basics of the Christian faith

One of the major ways in which we share our faith is via courses that introduce people to Christianity, such as Alpha

AS the participants stream into the church hall, they discover glasses of wine, cups of tea and named place settings on the tables. The churchwardens emerge from the kitchen to serve a hearty meal. Warm conversation starts to flow.

Later they'll split into two groups – one to take part in an Alpha Course and another to study the Bible Course in a different room. Each group watches a video and chats about an aspect of the Christian faith. No question is off limits.

These evenings in the church hall at **St Mary's Church, Warsash**, are just part of the frontline of evangelism in our diocese. It's these kind of small groups studying the basics of Christianity that are drawing people into our congregations.

Churchgoers invite friends to join them for food, a presentation and a discussion on topics such as 'Why did Jesus die?' or 'How does God guide us?'. Every opinion is valued.

These courses bring together participants from St Mary's Warsash, St Peter's Titchfield, St John's Locks Heath, and St Paul's Sarisbury Green. These 'Western Wards' parishes take it in turns to host the 11-week Alpha Course each term.

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Working together means there may be as many as 40 participants in one room. And because each church hosts an Alpha Course in turn, there's often one just about to start to invite people to.

James McNicholas, who goes to St Mary's Warsash, signed up for Alpha at St Peter's, Titchfield, last year because he wanted to get confirmed. Having experienced it

once and been confirmed in our cathedral in December, he's now going through Alpha for a second time.

"I moved to Locks Heath about 15 years ago and chose to go to St Mary's as it had a Book of Common Prayer service at 8am," he said. "It's a beautiful church and I loved it. I joined the choir and sometimes I go to the evening service these days.

"I wanted to be confirmed, so I did Alpha last October. It's a great opportunity to ask questions about the meaning of life with other like-minded people. And I think the videos are amazing – the presenter Nicky Gumbel is a real inspiration. I go home and watch them. For me, Alpha was filling in the gaps and addressing some questions from a different perspective."

Richard Banks isn't a regular churchgoer, but has been baptised and is interested to discover more. He saw the Alpha Course advertised

outside church and decided to attend. "I wanted to give it a go, so that I can understand more about people who have faith and what spirituality there is in Christianity," he said. "I'll decide what I think at the end of the course. I'm not really here for small talk – I want to talk about what matters, because it does fascinate me."

Mel Chambert enjoyed an Alpha course at St Peter's so much that she signed up for the Bible Course this year. She'd never been a regular churchgoer before Alpha, but now considers St Peter's her home church.

She said: "You meet people from different churches and of all ages and have conversations you wouldn't normally have. I'd always had faith, but it was quite individual. I realised there were other people I could share it with.

"I've learnt a lot about the Christian faith, especially on the away day because people shared experiences in real depth. Now I go to St Peter's when I can. When I go, it feels like I'm coming home because I know people there."

Sule Taylor first came to St Mary's Warsash three years ago for her husband's funeral. He's buried in the churchyard. She also went on an Alpha Course first and then signed up to the Bible Course – an eight-session course that introduces you to the big themes of the Bible.

She said: "When my husband passed away, I felt at a bit of a loss. I wanted to know more. I always knew there was a God, but I wasn't religious. Alpha has been amazing. It's a lovely community, and you make friends. I've had a lot of questions and most of them have been answered."

Many of our other churches also host Alpha Courses, with the classic elements of a shared meal, a presentation about faith and small discussion groups each week. Sometimes a local church leader



Top: Mel Chambert (left) listens intently during the discussion as part of the Bible Course; middle: churchwarden Ian Coombs serves the hot meal; bottom: Richard Banks (left) discusses issues during the Alpha Course