

Alpha Launch Event or Supper Planner

These guidelines are designed to help you plan an event to launch your Autumn Alpha course as part of the 2007 Alpha Invitation.

It's easy for church members to invite people to a fun launch event which will give them a flavour of what Alpha is about and a chance to meet other people taking part in the course. In 2006 over 124,000 people came to an event to launch an Autumn Alpha course - many of these went on to attend an Alpha course.

The idea is to have a relaxed event including a short talk to introduce guests to the Christian faith, which they can explore further on the Alpha course. If you plan ahead it can be great fun and have a huge impact on the lives of many people.

Materials marked with a star - * - are available from the Alpha Publications Hotline.

Materials marked with a circle - ● - are available free from us.

See **Key contacts** below for details of how to order.

Key contacts

* **The Alpha Publications Hotline** – to order the materials marked with a star (*) or to receive a free copy of the Alpha Publications Brochure call 0845 758 1278 or email alpha@stl.org. Resources can also be ordered online from alphashop.org.

● **The Alpha Invitation** – for any questions about how to take part and how to order the free materials marked with a circle (●), call the Alpha Invitation office on 0845 644 7544 or email ukinvitation@alpha.org.

The UK Alpha website – It's all on uk.alpha.org/runningcourse. See the website for updates, news, forms and lists of events.

Please let us know about your event and we can advertise it on the website. Fill in a form online at uk.alpha.org/runningcourse or call us on 0845 644 7544.

For help in planning a larger event see 'How to plan a Beacon Alpha Launch Event' on uk.alpha.org/runningcourse.

Key Points

The Feel and Format

An Alpha launch event is a chance to invite non-churchgoing friends, family, neighbours and colleagues to a relaxed, fun evening where they can find out about the Alpha course. The idea is that it is a friendly and welcoming 'taster' for people who are unfamiliar with church – so the music played during the evening is not Christian and grace is not said before the food. Likewise, it is important that the talk and testimonies avoid any Christian terminology which might be unclear or confusing to guests (such as 'born again', 'evangelism' or 'came to faith'.)

The evening usually involves drinks and nibbles, or sometimes a meal, with live music, followed by testimonies and the Alpha talk: 'Is there more to life than this?'. It rounds off with coffee and invitations to an Alpha course starting soon after.

When and Where

They can be held just about anywhere. Past venues include homes, pubs, hotels, football clubs, restaurants, a wild animal park, a lighthouse, a castle, schools, a golf clubroom – and even churches! Some churches combine Alpha launch events with harvest celebrations or church barbecues. You know what will work best for your area. Choosing an imaginative venue can be a good way to publicise the event and get coverage in the local press.

Generally celebration Alpha events and suppers are held at the end of each Alpha course so people who have just completed the course can share a bit about the Alpha course they have just done with friends, family, neighbours and colleagues.

For the Autumn Alpha Invitation, launch events are also held before the Autumn course starts, to launch the course after the long summer break. The national advertising campaign runs throughout September, so it is good to schedule your event to coincide with this heightened public profile. Many courses find that it works well to have their Alpha prayer meeting during the second week of September and their launch event in the third week, or a week or two before your course is due to start. This means that Autumn Alpha courses often start at the end of September or the beginning of October, so that they finish in time for Christmas.

Work together

Think about joining with other churches to organise a launch event. This enables groups of churches to share resources and planning responsibilities and to use economies of scale in the taskforce and catering. It also helps to widen the choice of venues. Churches working together sends a powerful message of unity to the press and public.

Photos

'A picture is worth a thousand words' – remember to take photos at your supper. It's a great way to promote your Alpha course. We would be very grateful if you could send us photos of your supper no matter how big or small (email photos to ukinvitation@alpha.org), so we can possibly use them in our communications to share what's happening around the country. Your local press may also be interested, especially if your supper is held in an interesting local venue.

Practicalities

Publicity

Invitations which are attractive and professional looking help to inspire the congregation to invite guests. Alpha postcard invitations have been designed to link with the national advertising campaign, and can be customised with your own details. They are available in two sizes – A5 and A6 and are available from the Alpha Publications hotline or alphashop.org. You could either overprint the postcards or use sticky labels (if you use Avery labels the best size to use is L7169 for A5, L7166 for A6).

Email invitations which can be customised to your event and emailed from your email account to guests can be completed at uk.alpha.org/runningcourse.

Alternatively, if you would prefer to design your own invitations, the graphics from the current advertising campaign can be downloaded from uk.alpha.org/runningcourse.

Launch to your congregation

Tell your church about the event and how they can be involved. It's a good idea to tell people the date, time and venue a month or two beforehand (if it's an Autumn event, then before the school summer holidays) so that they can begin to plan who to invite.

The 4-minute Alpha Invitation DVD is a great way to inspire the congregation and to link your event to the wider vision across the UK - show the DVD at a Sunday service (Alpha UK can supply additional free copies). You could also consider launching the event to mid-week groups by contacting the leaders personally to see if they would like to host a group at the event.

Follow this launch with a reminder 2-3 weeks before the event. Provide Invitations to the Launch Event for the congregation to use to invite friends (these could be given out at a Sunday service, available in the welcome area of church and given to mid-week group leaders to distribute to their groups.)

Publicise widely

Publicise your event as widely as possible. Put up posters to link with the national advertising campaign and place an ad in the local paper. You can download 'A Guide to Local Alpha Course Advertising' or 'Using PR to Promote Local Alpha Courses' from uk.alpha.org/runningcourse which give advice on how to place an advert or story in the local paper.

Organising the event

The venue

First impressions count – walk through the venue, thinking about how it will look to a guest coming for the first time. Candles, flowers, soft lighting and live music all contribute to a fun and welcoming party atmosphere – and may even challenge some perceptions about church. It can work well to have a colour scheme for the decoration. Little touches can make an enormous difference, in particular, think about where guests might put their coats, putting flowers into the washrooms and having a well lit, welcoming entrance.

Catering or refreshments

Work out the type of event you would like to have – an informal drinks reception, a buffet supper or a sit down dinner. Think about how your event will enable people to mix and meet people who have done or are thinking of doing the Alpha course and to meet those who are hosting the event.

Bear in mind that guests might not all arrive at the same time and how this might affect serving hot food. Likewise, guest numbers can often fluctuate with cancellations and extras arriving on the night, which will need to be incorporated into the catering plan. If you are having a buffet, it can be helpful to have people serving food to make sure that there is enough for everyone. A recipe suggestion is at the end of these guidelines.

Many groups have found that an informal drinks party with snacks works well, as it allows for flexibility in numbers of guests and keeps overall catering costs down, whilst enabling people to circulate and meet each other.

Music

A live band is a wonderful way to create a party atmosphere (but make sure the music isn't too loud so that people are still able to chat). A light jazz, classical quartet or acoustic musician can work well. There might be a local student or upcoming band who you could ask.

If you are unable to get a live band, the music suggested below might help. Listen to these pieces of music before the night to check they are suitable:

Norah Jones – Come away with me

Marie Brennan – Perfect time

Keith Jarrett – The melody at night, with you

CPE Bach – Flute Concertos

Mozart – Horn Concertos

Mozart – Flute Concertos No 1 & 2; Concerto for flute and harp

Speakers

Host – this should be someone who is able to act as MC – to welcome everyone, introduce and thank the speaker and tell people about the Alpha courses that will be taking place locally. A local Alpha course or church leader is ideal.

Speaker – who will give a short talk to introduce guests to some of the topics and themes which are explored in the Alpha course. The talk 'is there more to life than this?' is ideal

- a talk transcript is available from Alpha UK. Alternatively, you could show it on DVD (available from the Alpha Publications hotline).

Testimonies – 3 or 4 people who have recently done an Alpha course and are willing to speak about their experience (see Appendix 1 for guidelines).

Logistics

It's important to think through the following in advance of the event:

- Music and sound system – cables, speakers and someone to manage the technical operations on the night.
- Speaker microphones – check whether the speaker and testimonies require microphones and test these before the event starts.
- Speaker stand for the speaker to put their notes on (and a glass of water).
- Ensure that all guests will be able to see the speaker.
- Chairs and tables – will people be sitting down or standing up to hear the talk? Where will they put their drinks and dirty plates?

Teamwork

Depending on the number of expected guests, you may need a team of helpers to cook, lay the tables, decorate the venue, welcome guests, serve the food and clear up during and after the event. Experience suggests that you need one helper for every eight to ten guests.

The key jobs to cover on the day are:

- **Set up** – decorating the venue, setting up tables & chairs and the technical arrangements.
- **Welcomers** – on the door (and outside in the car park or by the entrance) to welcome guests, point them in the right direction and take their coats.
- **Catering preparation** – organising and preparing drinks and food.
- **Hosts / servers** – to offer around drinks and nibbles – this is a great job for meeting and speaking to people, so have lots of friendly people on this team so that they have the time to chat to guests.
- **Clear up** – to collect dirty glasses and plates during the evening and to tidy up the venue after the event.

If you are aiming for a dinner for over 25 guests, then you might consider using caterers. These are best found by personal recommendation. When booking caterers, find out exactly what they offer in terms of crockery, cutlery, waiting, clearing away and how much each service costs – this will help you decide which services you wish to purchase.

Cost

The idea is that guests should not be asked to pay for the evening. If the cost of the event is to be covered by selling tickets, hosts should buy tickets for themselves and their guests in advance.

Suggested informal launch event programme

7.00 -8.00pm	Guests start to arrive and are offered drinks. Band play background music Hosts circulate, offering nibbles
8.00pm	People encouraged to take a seat. Host welcomes everyone and introduces testimonies. Testimonies: 3 or 4 people interviewed on their experience of Alpha (see appendix 1 for guidelines on choosing Alpha testimonies).
8.15pm	The talk: 'Is there more to life than this?' – either by a speaker or on DVD.
8.45pm	Guests encouraged to stay and talk. The band re-starts, more drinks or coffee served, hosts circulate with brownies.
9.30pm	Guests start to leave, hosts offer *Alpha invitations*, copies of *Why Jesus* at exits.

Suggested supper programme

The following programme is a tried and tested timetable based on the recipe included in these guidelines (see page 7). If you are serving three courses, or the food you have chosen has to be served by waiting staff, you will need to adjust the timings accordingly.

7.00 -7.30pm	Guests start to arrive and are seated with their friends Band play background music – light jazz/classical Main course served as people arrive.
8.00pm	Dessert served – all plates cleared by 8.30pm.
8.30pm	Testimonies: 3 or 4 people interviewed on their experience of Alpha (see appendix 1 for guidelines on choosing Alpha testimonies).
8.50pm	The talk: 'Is there more to life than this?' – either by a speaker or on DVD.
9.15pm	Coffee served, guests welcome to stay and talk. Invitations to a local Alpha course and copies of *Why Jesus?* distributed to tables.
9.45pm	Guests start to leave, hosts offer *Alpha invitations*, copies of *Why Jesus* at exits.

- As an alternative to the DVD *Is there more to life than this?*, the DVD *Explore* or the video *The God Who Changes Lives*, featuring the testimony of Paul Cowley, may be used.
- If you are just starting to run Alpha and don't yet have Alpha testimonies, you may like to show a testimony video, such as *Exploring The Meaning Of Life* or *A changed life – Gram Seed's story*
- *The Alpha Course Introductory Booklet* is a good resource to have available if guests have questions about the Alpha course.

Main course suggestion

This is a main course that has proved popular at Alpha suppers. It can be prepared in advance and served cold. The amounts below are for 24 people. For further ideas on menus at an Alpha supper, see the [*Alpha cookbook*](#) available from the Alpha Publications Hotline.

Memsahib's party chicken

4 x 2kg (4lb) chickens – fresh for roasting

10-12 tbsp mayonnaise

1 kg (2lb) Greek Yoghurt

4 tbsp tomato puree

6-8 tbsp tikka paste

2 large bunches of coriander

1 large bunch of parsley

salt and black pepper.

1. Roast the chickens in advance – in a preheated oven at 200°C/400°F/gas mark 6 for 1-1½ hours and leave until cold. (Always check that the chicken is cooked right through.)
2. Carve the breasts of the chicken into smallish pieces and pick all the flesh you can get off the rest of the chickens.
3. Put the mayonnaise, yoghurt, tomato puree in a large bowl. Mix together and stir in the tikka paste to taste, adding salt and black pepper as you feel the mixture needs it.
4. Save some of the best sprigs of the big leaves of the coriander for decoration and then pull the rest of

the leaves off the stems and chop roughly. Chop the parsley finely. Stir the chopped coriander leaves and parsley into the yoghurt mixture.

5. Add the chicken pieces to the mixture and stir with a wooden spoon so the chicken is thoroughly coated.

6. Cover the bowl loosely with cling film and refrigerate until needed.

7. Serve in large shallow serving dishes and decorate with whole coriander leaves.

Serve with spiced yellow rice, see below, and a mixed leaf salad.

Spiced yellow rice

1.15kg (2½lb) long grain rice

1 level tbsp salt

2 tsp ground turmeric

3 x 2cm (1") sticks of cinnamon

10 whole cloves

chopped parsley to decorate.

1. Bring 2lt (3 ½ pt) water in a saucepan to the boil
2. Mix together the rice, salt and turmeric in a bowl and add the cinnamon and cloves. Pour the rice mixture into the boiling water
3. Once the water has come to the boil, lower the heat so the rice cooks gently. Cook for 10 – 12 minutes until the rice is 'al dente' to the bite, not too hard or soft. Remove from the heat. All the water will have been absorbed by the rice.

4. Serve in a large dish decorated with chopped parsley.

Appendix 1: Choosing Alpha testimonies

The speaker may interview 3-4 people about their experiences on Alpha before giving the talk. Guidelines for finding good testimonies are:

- Ask people who have come to faith, or whose faith has come alive on an Alpha course.
- Choose people with whom members of the audience will be able to identify from a range of ages (and denominations if it is a joint supper) but make sure you include young people.
- Include some young men who were not Christians before Alpha – often this group is under represented.
- Choose people who talk naturally, without ‘Christian jargon’.
- Identify these people, but ask them only a week or so before the event. If people know too far in advance, they can start to get nervous.

It works best *not* to ask people if they would be willing to ‘give their testimony’ (which can seem mystifying/frightening to new Christians). Instead, simply ask people if they would be willing to come and meet the speaker, and maybe say something about their experience of Alpha on the evening. In some cases, if people know they will definitely be speaking in public, they will ‘script’ a story, which is never as powerful as spontaneous interview.

The interviewer should meet these people before the event, and decide the order in which to interview them.

The following four questions are recommended when ‘interviewing’ people about Alpha:

- Were you a churchgoer before coming on Alpha?
- How did you come to do the Alpha course?
- What happened on Alpha?
- What difference has Jesus made to your life?

Name & age	Key Points	Alpha date	Pre Alpha...
			Christian: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/> Church: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/>
			Christian: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/> Church: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/>
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