

One is never too old for Alpha: Courses for Seniors

Frequently we are asked about Alpha courses for seniors. Whereas many of the younger retired people are still very active and take a role in church life, it is necessary to provide an adapted service for persons in sheltered or residential homes.

What you should take into account is subject of the following article by Adrian v. Tschirschky, Alpha Advisor in Hamburg, Germany.

The Lutheran Marktkirche in Hamburg-Poppenbuettel ran a number of Senior Alpha courses in Residential Homes. With a population that gets older and an increasing number of homes caring for them there is also a rising demand for Alpha courses in this area.

We must however bear in mind that the course should be focused on the needs of these persons.

Our aim is to help people to move forward in their faith by finding a living relationship with Jesus. The elderly people have often gathered experience in and around church during their life, many remember biblical stories. The older generation is generally not used to talking about personal faith openly; so many only come at first to listen, some without any expectation. They view the matter from a distance to decide whether it is interesting enough. That is a great challenge but it is also a chance for us.

It is of vital importance to get the Home management “into your boat” and to obtain their support for providing the necessary rooms. We have experienced that the Home provided coffee and cake each time we met. We have experienced that the course should generally only be held in the afternoon. There are so many activities in these Homes, that at other times there are no rooms available and the participants have programmes they generally would not like to miss.

Many people are basically Vicar orientated. Our experience is that a talk by a lay speaker has less weight! The average number of participants at our courses was between 10 and 20. Some guests found it physically difficult to hold out the whole time, so they did not attend the group discussions after the talk.

A Senior Alpha course in a residential home is demanding and the team needs much love, patience and understanding for the guests and requires much prayer support. For many we are the sole witnesses for the crucified and resurrected Lord. Seniors nowadays seldom get in contact with church, their thoughts about death are very real and that needs our true compassion and all our belief to meet their fears.

Drinking coffee together is an excellent opportunity to start up.

Arranging the discussion groups needs careful consideration to see who fits to whom and who does not under any circumstances, as later changes can be very embarrassing. In the groups “dominating speakers” may see their chance, therefore a firm but kind leadership is most important.

This may all appear somewhat difficult, but we are always rewarded. There are many “pearls” among the listeners, who are particularly thankful for this nudge, to be brought out of their world of thoughts, to see their life in a new light and to learn what support personal faith is. When this occurs, the course and all our efforts have been worthwhile. Who would not be pleased and thank the Lord, if parents or grandparents or friends could also experience this gift.

I would like to conclude with the information that in two residential homes for seniors in the neighbourhood of our church there are now groups that gather regularly, one is a bible study group led by a retired clergy and another is a house group. Some participants now attend our Sunday Church Services thanks to a car shuttle-service.