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[Pri](#)
[Em](#)

This week:

Canada

- [International](#)
- [International briefs](#)
- [Youth](#)
- [Faith Alive](#)

- [Send a Letter](#)
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[Archives](#)

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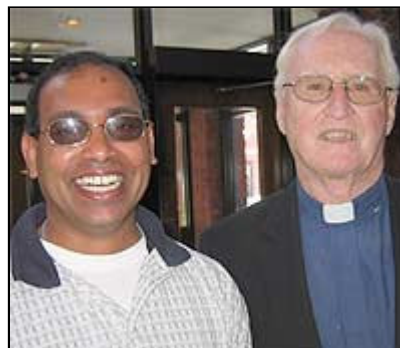
Alpha Courses gaining support among Catholics

By Deborah Gyapong
Canadian Catholic News

OTTAWA (CCN)—The Alpha Course on the essential teachings of Christianity is growing in favor among Catholics as bishops and priests see its potential as an evangelization tool.

Likewise, the leaders of the Alpha movement see the Catholic Church as an essential partner in its mission to re-evangelize Canada.

The creator and presenter of Alpha's video series, Nicky Gumbel, is urging churches of all denominations to work together, saying that the disunity among Christians is a big barrier to reaching the unchurched.

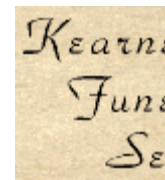


Deborah Gyapong / CCN
Father Lukose Kochupurackal of Holy Cross Parish in Ottawa and Msgr. Len Lunney, Episcopal Vicar English Pastoral Services Ottawa Archdiocese at an Alpha event in Ottawa.

Gumbel made a point of visiting both Cardinal Marc Ouellet in Quebec City and Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic in Toronto while visiting Canada the first week of August.

When in Quebec City August 1, Gumbel, in addition to meeting with Ouellet, spoke to a predominately Catholic group of about 250 priests and lay people hosted by Auxiliary Bishop Gilles Lemay, who had run an Alpha Course in his previous parish.

Gumbel told CCN he found Ouellet, who



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is Primate of the Catholic Church in Canada impressive.

"His love for Christ came through," Gumbel said. "His passion for evangelization, for unity, for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are all so obvious in his life and his ministry. I felt so refreshed being with him."



Deborah Gyapong / CCN
Alpha Chaplain Rev. Nickey Gumbel, the Anglican Priest who is the lecturer known to millions who've taken the Alpha Course, visited with both Cardinal Ouellet and Cardinal Ambrozic when in Canada in early August.

Gumbel met Pope John Paul II in 2004, and met with Pope Benedict XVI when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger. He says the present Pope already knew about Alpha because he had previously breakfasted with Alpha leaders from Germany.

"He was also very gracious and very encouraging for us. He was particularly encouraging about the young people. Again, his love for Jesus came across," Gumbel said.

In Ottawa Aug. 2, Gumbel told an ecumenical gathering of more than 600 Alpha leaders that the passage in Luke 5 where Jesus tells Peter he will make him a fisher of men and women, not only shows us that evangelization is the work of the Church, but also the passage shows how it is done.

"So often we've given up the evangelization. We have lovely clean churches. We polish the brass, dust the pews," he said. "If we catch a whole lot of fish they may not be very nice fish. They may be dirty fish. They may sit in my pew. They may take the entire pastor's time."

Gumbel warned that just as the fish strained and began to break Peter's nets, a commitment to evangelization will strain and change existing church structures.

Just as Peter had to call out to neighboring boats for help, churches will have to rely on each other to bring about the re-evangelization of the nation.

Gumbel pointed out that the doctrines that divided Christians are irrelevant to young people today, that the battle facing Christians is more like that of the first century when people were asking who Jesus was—was He the Son of God?

"What unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us," he said. "The Holy Spirit is lowering the denominational barriers."

"There are millions of people out there who don't know Jesus and who have this spiritual hunger inside them," he

said.

"Nothing is impossible with Jesus," he said, "The name of Jesus should no longer be a swear word."

The Alpha Course originated in the 1970s as a teaching tool at Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican Church in London, England.

In the early 1990s, Gumbel, a former barrister who had become an Anglican priest, changed the course to appeal to non-churchgoers and made videotapes of the 15 lectures.

Each Alpha session starts with fellowship around a meal, then one of Gumbel's entertaining and engaging lectures on subjects such as "Who is Jesus?" "Does God Heal Today?" and then a free-ranging discussion where questions and civil disagreements are welcomed.

Alpha is offered over 10 weeks, with a retreat day or weekend in the middle.

In Canada, more than 650,000 people have taken Alpha, and many of them have found faith in Jesus Christ as a result. Alpha courses now run in 144 countries in 50 languages.

Those who are already believers find the course as a good refresher on the basics and they also find it as a great ministry opportunity.

Many Christians find Alpha an ideal venue for taking friends who might be threatened or wary about going to a church service.

During Gumbel's Ottawa visit, Msgr. Len Lunney brought greetings on behalf of Archbishop Marcel Gervais, and told the gathering about Gumbel's visit with Ouellet before welcoming Gumbel to the stage.

Lunney told CCN that Alpha is about "pulling together, emphasizing what we share in common and downplaying differences."

Lunney noted with amusement that he, a Catholic, a representative of the Archdiocese, introduced an Anglican Priest inside a Pentecostal Church.

The Ottawa Archdiocese will be running six Alpha courses in the fall, but Lunney expects that number to grow.

Father Lukose Kochupurackal of Holy Cross Parish will be running one of them. He has already run one at his previous parish in Manotick.

"It was amazing," he said.

Kochupurackal also participated in a community Alpha run with other churches and praised it as a community building exercise.

In the group's literature on Alpha in a Catholic Context, Archbishop Emeritus Adam Exner of Vancouver provides this endorsement: "Alpha is a tried, proven and effective method of reaching out to the fallen-away and those who do not yet believe. I really believe that Alpha is one way of responding to what the Holy Spirit is asking of us today."

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