

Churches launch \$1 million ad blitz

Jimmy Pattison among the contributors

Bob Harvey

CanWest News Service

OTTAWA -- This weekend, Canadian churches will kick off a \$1-million advertising campaign that invites people to "explore the meaning of life" over dinner.

The goal is to encourage Canadians to take a first or second look at Christianity over home-cooked meals to be served up in more than 2,000 homes, community centres, churches, rinks, pubs, universities, detention centres and other locations this September.

"We make it as unchurchy as possible. We go where the people are," said Dave Atkins, an Ottawa engineer and organizer of the annual event.

Among the contributors to the campaign is Jimmy Pattison, the British Columbia billionaire and devout Christian who funded a private Christian school in B.C. and likes to play trumpet in church bands.

Pattison Billboards, one of his many enterprises, is donating one free billboard for every three that are rented.

The event is known as Alpha, an acronym that describes the intent of the course: A for anyone interested in finding out more about Christianity; L for learning and laughter; P for pasta; H for helping one another; A for ask any questions you like.

Alpha was cooked up by Reverend Nickey Gumbel, a former lawyer and one-time atheist who is now an Anglican priest in London, England.

Gumbel saw that if Christianity was to get a real hearing, what was needed was Christians who would invite friends for a no-holds-barred discussion over a good meal. That idea soon developed into a 10-week course that starts with a meal, and sometimes wine, and is centred on short and humorous video presentations of Christian basics.

An estimated five million people, including 350,000 Canadians, have since participated in Alpha outreaches in 132 countries since that first dinner in London in 1992.

Sally Start, the national director of Alpha Canada, says "people are now coming to church who had no previous church background or perhaps had a 'toxic' experience."

Canadian organizers say there are still 24 million "unchurched" Canadians, and the 56 denominations involved in the campaign want to feed some more people. In Eastern Ontario alone, 179 churches will participate this fall.

Rev. David Crawley, pastor of downtown Ottawa's St. George's Anglican, said the Alpha program provides an experience of Christian community, some basic spiritual formation, and often an experience of God.

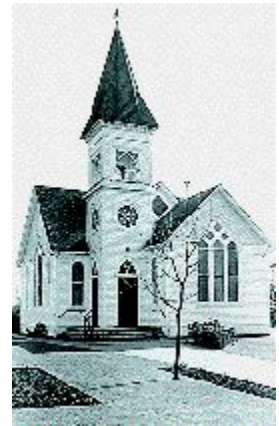
"It offers a way of life that is potentially transforming. Those are the things that keep me going."

St. George's started offering Alpha programs in 1996, and has since done it 18 times.

"It has brought in new people, and had a wonderful renewing effect on the congregation as well," said Crawley.

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