

Basics courses spark new faith



Alex and Isabella Hutchinson outside St Jude's Church

Chance to ask my questions on faith

WHEN her husband Nick died, Alex Hutchinson was pregnant with their first child.

Not surprisingly, she had questions about God and the afterlife, as does her daughter Isabella, who is now three. Alex also felt as though she had a spiritual hole in her life.

A friend suggested that she read the Christian bestseller *The Shack*, and also try an Alpha course. She took part in a course run by St Jude's Church, Southsea, and found it a life-changing experience.

"I was brought up an atheist, but I live in a society where people go to great lengths to worship an invisible being, and people give up high-powered careers for Church," she said. "I had friends who had a strong faith and I was curious, as I felt I had a spiritual hollow in my life.

"Nick was diagnosed with cancer when I was six weeks pregnant and died when I was seven months pregnant. He was only 35 and he was an officer in the Royal Navy. And trying to explain to Isabella where her daddy was made me think."

Alex, who is now 29, tried some other churches, but felt most comfortable at the Sunday services at St Jude's, which mix breakfast, children's activities, and a quickfire presentation about the gospel. Then she joined

the church's summer 2013 Alpha course.

"I found the course welcoming, open-minded and the people genuinely wanted to have a discussion about the issues," she said. "Every single volunteer was kind, sensitive, non-pushy and gave me space to make up my own mind. My questions seemed very basic, but I was still able to ask them.

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I seemed like a fair swap – Nigel Rennie taught the Rev Andy Norris how to sail after Andy had taught him about Christianity.

Nigel helped his local vicar through his sailing exams to thank Andy for leading a 10-week Alpha course that explained the basics of faith.

The 53-year-old sailing instructor and examiner was part of Andy's congregation at St Mary's Church, Warsash, before Andy, now 51, moved to become rector of Alverstoke.

And Nigel was one of 3.3 million people in the UK and 22.5 million people worldwide to experience Alpha. Participants meet one evening a week for a shared meal, to hear a talk about an aspect of Christianity and then to discuss those issues in small groups.

The philosophy is that no question asked is out of bounds, and participants can ultimately decide whether Christianity is for them. Alpha and other basic Christianity courses have helped millions to understand more about faith and become more involved in their local churches.

Alpha is the most well-known of these courses. Other courses such as Christianity Explored or the Emmaus Discipleship Course also unpack the Christian message, albeit with different emphases.

Andy and Nigel actually became friends when Nigel's son Thomas became seriously ill when he was just six weeks old. Thomas had a heart condition and was taken into St Mary's Hospital in Portsmouth, where his heart stopped twice.

Andy was Nigel's vicar and visited the family in hospital. Nigel and his family had recently started coming to St Mary's Church in Warsash.

"I remember the first time Andy tried to visit, he didn't actually get there because his car caught fire on the M27," said Nigel. "But he did get there, and it is out of that kind of adversity that friendships are often formed.

"I've been part of the military – in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers – and had been spiritual, but not religious. I'd visited war zones and had skipped army yachts, and I'd always found the padres to be good people to speak to.

"There were three incidents that made me think more about the preciousness of life. One was when I had to steer a boat into Crete in a Force 10 gale. Afterwards I sat in a church for a while, realising that I was mortal.

"The second was in 1997 when I was in a yacht in the Pacific. There was a Force 12 storm, the boat rolled over and was ultimately lost. We were in the water for two hours and the people sent to rescue us lost their lives.

"And the third was when Thomas was ill in 2005. The problem was eventually traced back to a nerve being trapped in his



Nigel Rennie (left) helps the Rev Andy Norris in a boat in Gosport Marina

neck, and he is now in perfect health.

"Although I was coming to church, it became more of a priority after Thomas was ill. I wanted to be a full member and to be confirmed.

"The Alpha course was in Andy's home and 12 of us sat around the dining table for a meal, and then in his front room to watch a DVD and talk. The whole ambience was good – it was adding to what we knew and it was fun.

"I was confirmed by the bishop in the cathedral in February 2012, and Alpha definitely made me feel happier in the church environment.

"The videos were brilliant and I'd say to anyone thinking about it that they should do it. My kids loved Andy's services and the Messy Church at St Mary's, and we're pleased to be part of the church."

Meanwhile, Nigel had been helping Andy learn how to sail. They had sailed back from Cork in 2007, with Andy skippering for the first time from Falmouth back home.

Then in 2012 Nigel helped Andy to prepare to sail around Britain, and mentored him for his sea survival and diesel engine courses. And he helped him through his yachtsmaster offshore exam earlier this year. Nigel is an instructor/examiner for the Royal Yachting Association, so knew what would be required.

"Nigel was determined to get me through the exam before I left the parish," said Andy. "It was his parting gift to me, because if I'd done it commercially it would have been quite expensive."

And Nigel said: "I do think each of us should use our skills to help each other. You can't always help the person who helps you, but I was more than happy to

help Andy through his exam as he had been such a support to me and my family."

Alison Sales will make a similar public declaration of her new-found faith when she is baptised in the sea this month.

She came from an atheist background, but has been on two Alpha courses, the most recent with Holy Rood Church, Stubbington. It's made a massive difference to her life.



Barbara Crick with her sons John, 5, and Sam, 3

Discussions helped me to make sense of Christianity

WHEN Barbara Crick moved back to Emsworth, she started going back to the church she'd been to as a child.

Because she only went to St James Church occasionally, she thought its Christianity Explored course would be a good way to get to know people. The course is similar to Alpha courses, with a meal, a talk and discussion groups.

In fact, it's resulted in a deepening of her faith and prompted her to go to church more regularly with her sons Josh, 5, and Sam, 3. She's now part of a house group that studies the Bible and prays together.

"We moved back here two years ago after living and working in Cambridgeshire," said Barbara, now 33. "My husband Shaun had his own business, Hollybank Builders, and I started my own business,

Emsworth Cookery School. So we could move to be closer to my parents.

"I went to St James Church occasionally and so did my mum. I'd always enjoyed church when I went as a child. I'd heard of Alpha, but not Christianity Explored, but it sounded like a good way to get to know people. So my mum and I went together.

"I was in a discussion group with others who were my age, and we all got on well. We could discuss anything. I remember being at a toddler group with Sam and hearing the story of Noah. I thought it sounded like God being quite mean, so I asked about that in my small group.

"I got answers to my questions, but it was interesting to hear people with different points of view in our small group. I think we recognised that there wasn't always a straightforward answer.

WHY NOT JOIN ONE OF THESE COURSES THIS AUTUMN?

Starts: Tues 17 September
EMSWORTH, Pastoral Centre, The Square (7.30pm): Christianity Explored course run by St James Church, Emsworth. Contact: Pauline Nelson (01243-373465) or the parish office (01243-372428).

Portchester. Contact: the Rev Ian Meredith (023-9237 5422).

Starts: Tues 24 September
CLANFIELD, St James church hall (6.30pm-7.15pm): Alpha course for 10 to 15-year-olds; (7.45pm-9.15pm): Alpha course for adults. Contact: the Rev Anne Gothard (revgothard@gmail.com or 023-9259 6315).

LOCKS HEATH, St John's Church (11am): Taster session for Christianity Explored. Ask questions and get a flavour of what the course is about. Contact: Kath Sugden (sugden868@btinternet.com or 01489-578082).

Starts: Fri 4 October
SOUTHSEA, St Jude's Church, Kent Road (7.45pm): Alpha course. Contact: David Cain (023-9275 0442 or office@stjudes-southsea.org.uk).

Sunday 29 September

Her husband

Adrian had shown little interest in her first Alpha course, but – out of the blue – decided he should enrol a couple of years ago. He then became a Christian and encouraged Alison to do it for a second time.

And Alison's second experience of Alpha prompted her to make a commitment to Christianity too.

"I was an atheist, I knew nothing about the Bible, and had no knowledge about faith," she said. "But I was interested and attended an Alpha course at another church in the area several years ago.

"I enjoyed it, and it did awaken some faith that hadn't been there before. But it

was quite a small group on that course, most of whom were Christians. I didn't want to be constantly asking questions, because it felt a bit awkward. I did go to the church for a while, but then drifted away.

"My husband wasn't unsupportive, but he didn't really get it. So it was a surprise when he suddenly said a couple of years ago he'd like to do Alpha. I couldn't do it at the same time as we have a daughter to look after, but he did it and came to Christ. Then he encouraged me to go.

"The second time round, I was able to ask my questions, and I felt more confident because I already had some knowledge.

"I felt very welcome, the food was nice and I discovered that church was somewhere where I didn't feel judged – I could just be myself and feel accepted. The only shame was that Adrian and I couldn't share a course together because one of us had to be at home with Lily."

Alison is now part of a study group at the church. Sixteen people who went

through Alpha together now meet up each Tuesday night to study the Bible and pray together. And her baptism at Hill Head on September 18 will be another big step.

"I couldn't recommend Alpha highly enough," she said. "I didn't have a flash of inspiration. It was more of a gradual thing for me, but well worth experiencing. Life is all about making informed decisions, and I feel very comfortable with the decision to become a Christian."

And among the other basics courses is a new one developed by a group from the Church of England, including the Archdeacon of Portsdown, the Ven Joanne Grenfell. Entitled 'Pilgrim', it will be published this autumn and has been edited by Steven Croft, Stephen Cottrell, Paula Gooder and Robert Atwell.

It will help enquirers and new Christians to explore what it means to travel through life with Jesus Christ. The emphasis will be on participation, rather than on persuasion.

Joanne, who tried some of the course out with congregation members in her previous role at Sheffield Cathedral, said: "Enquirers will be encouraged to practice the ancient disciplines of biblical reflection and prayer, exploring key texts that have helped people since the earliest days of the Christian faith.

"Believing that the Christian faith is primarily about relationship, Pilgrim aims to lay a foundation for a lifetime of learning more about God's love revealed in Jesus Christ and what it means to be his disciple.

"Assuming little or no knowledge of the Christian faith, Pilgrim can be used at any point on the journey of discipleship and by every tradition in the Church of England."

For full details of this course, see www.pilgrimcourse.org. For information about other courses, see www.alpha.org, or www.christianityexplored.org



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