

Living the Questions



Adrian Alker, vicar of St Mark's Sheffield and founder of the Centre for Radical Christianity reviews a new study course from America, and finds something at last to challenge the assumptions and certainties of the Alpha course.

One of the eight principles underlying the Progressive Christianity Network is that we place more value in questioning than in absolutes. How can it be otherwise as we human beings try to make sense of the world and our lives, often from a faith perspective? Searching for, experiencing and reflecting upon the God of the Christian tradition is an enriching journey. Sadly too often churches and ministers have sought to impose an orthodoxy of belief, to portray the Christian life as believing in a set of truths rather than inviting people to be transformed in their journeying by the presence of the divine in their lives.

From the United States comes a new study course, calling itself 'a progressive alternative for Christian invitation and spiritual formation'. Living the Questions was launched in February of this year and provides, I believe, a much needed resource for people meeting in small groups. It is a course for the countless people of faith who have suffered, often in silence, as the 'killing certainties' (Jack Spong's phrase) claim to profess the unchanging truth of Christianity.

Having launched the course at St Mark's, let me offer you my initial reactions (and the reactions of folk here in Sheffield.)

Living the Questions comes as 12 themes, covered through half hour DVD presentations (4 DVDs cover the complete sessions), accompanied by downloadable website resources. The papers, to be downloaded and printed out, cover notes for group facilitators and detailed notes and questions for participants. There is detailed guidance on how to handle the material, how to set up the group, even what food and drink to provide! The pasta and chardonnay of Alpha course meetings is replaced here by the options of a light meal, snacks or a tea ceremony! The course is expected to be undertaken with care and preparation and there is a good orientation session which speaks of expectations and disclaimers. Time and again it is made clear that Living the Questions seeks not to provide easy answers but to be a resource for people who are in the midst of a life long conversation about the mysteries of faith and life.

The 12 themes are:

1. An invitation to Journey
2. Thinking Theologically
3. Creativity and Stories of Creation
4. Restoring Relationships
5. Evil and a God of Love: The Place of Suffering
6. A Kingdom without Walls: Ruth and Jonah
7. Social Justice and The Prophets
8. Intimacy with God
9. Lives of Jesus
10. Compassion: the Heart of Jesus' Ministry
11. A Passion for Christ: Paul the Apostle
12. Out into the World: Challenges Facing Progressive Christianity

The DVD material is of course very American, as are most of the contributors - notably Marcus Borg (you will see him here if not on tour!), Jack Spong, Dominic Crossan, Nancy Ammerman and many others. On the video clips you listen in to interviews, snippets of seminars and lectures and also direct camera speak to you the viewer. And so in session one on the role of biblical authority, you will meet Crossan speaking on fundamentalism, Lloyd Geering describing some fundamentalist churches as the enemies of Christianity and a marvellous southern American academic and pastor named Tex Sample, standing in front of an enormous cactus with a wonderful anecdote about a revivalist preacher! As a participant you have accompanying notes with helpful vocabulary and concepts explained, in case you were unsure, for example, on what the difference is between inerrant and infallible. Each session gives scripture references mentioned in the DVD, an opportunity for prayer and meditation and the chance to dig deeper.

Living the Questions is for those on a journey of faith discovery and perhaps those who have given up on traditionalist church teaching. It is very much geared to an articulate and well educated audience and makes clear its conviction that such a course is for small group use, not a teach yourself guide to Christianity! There is still a longing for the same philosophy to underline material aimed at younger folk but for now we have something at least to offer which challenges the assumptions and certainties of the Alpha course.

Living the Questions comes out of the 21st century and aims to offer the groundwork for a credible Christian faith for this century. Its use of DVD formatting, the ease of Emailing course notes etc all make for an attractive package for the local church or group. We shall have a number of small groups using the material after Easter at St Mark's and I am very happy to let anyone have further information as to how helpful Living the Questions proves to be as far as we experience it.

See www.livingthequestions.com for ways in which you can have an overview of the programme and order the material.