

# Liberal Episcopalians unveil modified Alpha: "Via media" (middle way) curriculum

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Progressive Episcopalians have begun test-marketing a revamped version of the popular Alpha course that organizers say can harness publicity over an openly gay bishop to bring people into the church. Some 15 Episcopal congregations across the country were the first to use the "via media" (middle way) eight-week curriculum in February.

The course was developed at All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, a flagship in the progressive movement. The course is structured on the model of the Alpha program, which caught on in the 1970s at Anglican churches in England. Alpha is a favorite of evangelicals and has been presented in some 25,000 Catholic and Protestant churches in 137 countries. (See [ABCs of faith: Beginning with Alpha.](#))

Organizers say "via media" puts equal emphasis on all parts of the "three-legged stool" of Anglican theology—scripture, reason and tradition—and takes a more expansive view of the Bible than Alpha. "I've hemmed and hawed on Alpha, sensing that it was missing two-thirds of what we are as Anglicans," said Steve Bartlett, pastor of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Coldwater, Michigan, who is rolling out the program.

Rosa Lee Harden, the curriculum's executive producer, said the Episcopal Church has an important message of inclusion to tell after it voted last year to approve its first openly gay bishop. "It's also a way to reach seekers who are just starting to consider the church, as well as people who have been hurt by the church who are looking for a way to return to their faith in a place that welcomes them for who they are," she said.

The eight-week course uses videotapes to convey basic messages on evangelism, Anglican theology, church history and scripture. Officials say 100 parishes have

asked to use the course, and another training session is set for March in Massachusetts.

“Alpha focuses heavily on what to believe, whereas ‘via media’ teaches you how to believe,” said Jason Samuel of Transfiguration Episcopal Church in Lake St. Louis, Missouri, who was to begin his series February 15. “Alpha tends to be dictatorial, whereas ‘via media’ gives you plenty of room and flexibility in teaching that allows people the freedom to ask questions.” *-Religion News Service*

*Correction from April 6, 2004, issue of the Century: Contrary to a Religion News Service story on an alternate, progressive version of the Alpha program, which ran in the March 9 Century, Pastor Steve Bartlett has not introduced the program at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Coldwater, Michigan. A spokesperson for everyvoice.net, the information source for the alternate program, said the company erred in saying that Bartlett had ordered the program for his church.*