

ALPHA

JOURNAL

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for Global Youth

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Alpha Behind Bars

Bringing spiritual freedom to prisoners worldwide

BY ALYSON R. QUINN

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handa was still a boy the first time he took a life.

He was raised in the Old Crossroads Township outside Cape Town, South Africa, a place

marred by a chasm between rich and poor and the still-fresh scars of the nation's apartheid past. He dutifully attended church on Sunday at the side of his formidable grandmother. But when Monday came, Thanda would see, walking along the road, the men whose word carried weight, men who weren't afraid to take what they felt they were owed: gangsters. He longed for a place in their ranks.

'I wanted to be seen,' Thanda remembers. 'I wanted to be accepted. I wanted protection.'

After joining his first gang as an adolescent, Thanda was swept into a world where respect came at the price of violence. At fourteen, he was arrested for murder but received a suspended sentence due to his age. Several years





later, in 2009, he found himself behind the bars of Brandvlei Correctional Centre, awaiting trial for murder yet again.

Found guilty, Thanda was transferred to Drakenstein Prison in the Western Cape to serve his twenty-year sentence.

Incarceration brought a change of scene but no fundamental changes to his life. Gangs seemed to be as active within prison walls as without; new prisoners often joined one just to survive. But Thanda had grown weary of that life. He felt the weight of his brokenness.

Then someone invited him to attend Alpha.

HOPE BEHIND BARS

Alpha first came to prisons in England in 1994. Exeter Prison was one of the early adopters of the course thanks to Michael Emmett, scion of a notorious crime family. Michael had gone to prison after being arrested for international cannabis smuggling. After reading about Holy Trinity Brompton in a newspaper, Michael urged his prison chaplain to run Alpha. Michael came to faith in Christ through the experience, and Alpha continued to spread to other correctional facilities.

After its initial success in the United Kingdom, Alpha in Prison expanded across the world. It is currently running in more than 600 prisons and secure facilities in 37 countries. In 2023, more than 30,000 people experienced Alpha as they served time in prison.

When Thanda encountered Alpha, it upended all he thought he knew about Christianity. The faith of his childhood 'bored' him, he says, but through Alpha, Thanda encountered Christianity not as a tedious religious obligation, but as an invitation to a loving relationship with a Saviour. He gained a greater understanding of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels. He also came to a greater understanding of himself. He realised that he could even survive in prison without a gang.

'[Alpha] paved the way for a new direction in my life,' he says.

Leaving his old affiliations behind, Thanda began pursuing a certificate in economic management science while still incarcerated. He never looked back.

Luxolo Kentane provides oversight to the ministry of Alpha in southern Africa. While government prison chaplains provide a basic level of spiritual support, he explains, the depth of brokenness

and need behind bars far outstrips their available time and resources. To help bridge that gap, Alpha partners with more than thirty churches to send trained volunteers into prison to facilitate Alpha sessions.

Luxolo estimates that nearly every day of the week, Alpha is being offered in one of six South African prisons, ranging from juvenile facilities to maximum-security prisons. He hopes to replicate Alpha's success in more parts of the country soon, with churches not only ministering to the incarcerated but also helping those who must make the difficult transition back into society.

A GLOBAL MISSION

Not only in South Africa but all around the world, ministry leaders are planning and praying for the ambitious expansion of Alpha among the incarcerated.

In Australia, approximately 1,050 people experienced Alpha in prison between July 2020 and December 2024, with volunteers coming into prison from a broad swathe of denominations to serve.

'They went into places people don't dare to go, to serve and show the love God has for each one of [us],' says one man who completed Alpha at Australia's Parklea Prison. 'Why do they do this? Because they want [us] to know that no matter how alone you feel, you're not alone, no matter what you've done or what's happened in your life.'

In Argentina, six different prisons hosted Alpha in 2024. And leaders hope to help 100 people who are already serving in prisons, including pastors, priests, chaplains, and lay people, to use Alpha in 2025.

'I was able to accept Jesus into my heart and make him Lord of my life,'



**“ALPHA VOLUNTEERS WENT INTO
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— Inmate in an Australian prison

says Franco, who completed Alpha at El Calafate Prison in Patagonia.

“Then I understood that although I did not have a father in my life, God had never left me alone. He was always with me. I was not an orphan. God was with me and knew me before I knew him.”

At the time of his comments, Franco planned to memorialise his faith commitment by being baptised in prison.

In Latin America overall, Alpha is on track to reach its 2025 goal of hosting 100 courses in prisons, reaching over 3,000 participants.

In Thailand in 2024, five dedicated volunteers from a local church ran Alpha at the Nakhon Sawan Central Prison. Eighty participants attended each monthly session. Throughout the course, many raised questions about life and its meaning. Initially, they struggled to understand who Jesus was and how he could be relevant to their lives.

However, when the topic of prayer was introduced, many – though not yet believers – requested that the team pray for them. They asked for God’s help in becoming better individuals, breaking free from past mistakes, and starting anew upon their release. They also sought prayers for their families.

Thus far, sixty of those prisoners have decided to accept Jesus Christ into their lives.

UNIQUE ASPECTS OF ALPHA BEHIND BARS

Running Alpha against a prison backdrop comes with unique challenges. For example, the technology to use Alpha videos may not be available or permitted, so volunteers must be prepared to present all content themselves.

Prison access may also change at a moment’s notice. A violent incident, the discovery of contraband or tensions between rival gangs – all can place a

facility on lockdown, with no visitors permitted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, prisons across the globe sealed themselves off from visitors, halting many programmes in their tracks. In some countries, like Australia, Alpha leaders are working to emphasise training prison chaplains, which will help to ensure the continuity of Alpha even when visitor access is interrupted.

Prison culture also encourages men to conceal their vulnerabilities behind a wall of hyper-masculinity. Those who display interest in spiritual matters risk being branded as ‘sell-outs,’ interested only in the sentence reduction that might accompany a public display of conversion and penitence.

‘You’ve got to be a man’s man,’ Luxolo explains. ‘If you’re seen going to a [spiritual programming activity], it hurts your brand.’

Alpha facilitators in prison try to overcome this barrier by patiently building relationships. While trust may take time to win, the rewards can be great. In Germany, eighty incarcerated people have been reached through Alpha in the last two years. ‘On our last night,’ reports prison ministry leader Elias Monden about one Alpha group in 2024, ‘[someone] shared that he was tempted to leave the meeting and never come back,

but he was glad he didn’t. He went on to share that the reason was love.’

Around the world, Alpha in Prison is transforming the lives of men and women behind bars as they encounter Jesus. The new life they find in Christ does not merely renew their hope; it also cascades out to their friends, families and neighbourhoods, as those who once broke the law become the bearers of good news.

‘The ripple effects are immense,’ Luxolo says. ‘Because if that person can change, it says to the people he once used to chill with, to do stuff with: “You don’t have to do what you were doing.” It restores hope.’

A MOVEMENT OF HOPE

Thanda, who once faced the crippling weight of a lengthy sentence, has been released early. Despite the challenges of his transition, he has not turned back to gang life. Instead, he keeps his course fixed on Jesus and has completed his bachelor’s degree.

‘God’s grace went further to reach me in the dark pit that I was in,’ Thanda says. ‘God’s grace followed me into prison, and I would encourage every man and woman out there to take part, to allow God to use you as he stretches his hand to make sure that salvation has got no limits.’

