

# The future in St William's parish.

## Where are we now?

St William's is a parish with much strength and where numerous excellent Christian activities occur. However, if we look at its development over time we have to face the fact that, despite the hard work and good will of many people, we are in a slow decline.

The simplest measure of our situation is the numbers attending Sunday Mass. There are those who have been parishioners for more than 40 years and know that then the normal Sunday Mass attendance was up around 1000, 20 years ago it was around 560, 10 years ago about 450, and now it is typically around 375. There are many factors that contribute to this slow decline, and this picture isn't unusual either in the Catholic Church or in other churches.

We surely feel a 'holy unease' at this situation – that is the Holy Spirit challenging us. Pope Francis has said: 'I believe that many times the Lord is knocking at the door so that we open it to let him get out – because many times we have a Christ who is locked in'. The Pope's diagnosis rings true: we rejoice in the Christ within (within our Church and within our hearts) but are daunted by the call to share Him with others. But that is our mission: to share the good news, to draw people in to share our life in Jesus Christ. We love Christ, we love our Church, we love our parish: we have to draw on all this and share it with others. This really is a reflection for the parish, not just for individuals.

## What should we do?

There are stories of parishes moving against the downward trend. We want to become one of those parishes. This doesn't happen overnight. It is the work of several years, and it is a work of the whole parish community. It is well worth reading Fr James Mallon's book *Divine Renovation* to see how the parish might respond to the challenges of today.

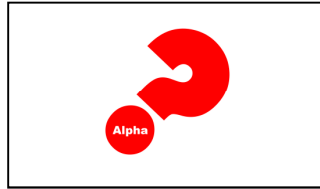
Some of this work will very much build on what we are already doing: being welcoming and hospitable on a Sunday, helping people to belong; helping our worship to be engaging and uplifting; reaching out to those less fortunate.

However, one area where we are clearly lacking as a community is that St William's currently offers nothing *systematic* to help people move into a relationship with Jesus. We cannot be comfortable about this. Fr Mallon strongly commends using the Alpha course (see later) to tackle this area. In addition to the obvious merit of actually trying to do what Jesus asked us to (i.e. 'make disciples' Mt 28:19), he identifies a variety of other benefits for building up the parish community.

There will be more to say about how we should develop as a parish as time goes on (and if you read Fr Mallon's book you will get the idea), but the first thing is to know more about Alpha. As you will have seen from the bulletin, we are starting this course soon. I certainly pray that this venture will be a success and that we will be able to run it on a rolling basis.

Fr John

# Alpha



## The purpose

The purpose of Alpha is *'to help bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ by sharing the good news of the gospel'*. It does this by addressing very basic questions (Is there more to life than this? Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus die? How can I have faith?....). Alpha is intended to be the first announcement of the good news of Jesus (in fancy language, the *kerygma*) rather than a course for deeper understanding and for further spiritual growth (*catechesis* and *mystagogy*), which comes later. Those elements should be ongoing throughout the Christian life.

## Who comes to Alpha?

Most people come to Alpha via invitation from someone they know. ('Alpha is friends bringing friends'.) Do consider inviting someone you think might respond well, and you can accompany them if you wish. If you aren't sure whether to invite them, pray for them and see if it becomes clearer.

If you think Alpha may be helpful for you then please do feel very welcome to sign up and come.

## The format

The people who attend are 'guests' those who help are part of the 'team'. There are eleven sessions. Each weekly session has three ingredients:

- sharing a simple meal together;
- a talk following a set programme (with online catch-up);
- conversation and discussion around what was said in the talk.

The final ingredient, the discussion, is a safe space for guests to react to what they have heard. The meal and the discussion happens in groups of 10-12 people, made up of 6-8 guests and 3-4 team members. One of the team members at the table is the host and has the role of animating the discussion, with the aim of getting guests to talk rather than with the aim of telling the guests anything (that has already happened in the talk). The other team members at the table are basically quiet during the discussion. There is a promise not to chase people up or to harass them in any way if they decide they don't want to continue at any point.

### **How can you help?**

- Pray for those who attend
- Invite people
- Help prepare food
- Ask to join the team (there is a variety of roles, and there is simple training)

The number of groups we can run is determined by (i) the number of team members we have (ii) our capacity to provide meals and (iii) the size of the venue.

### **What happens after Alpha?**

Well we haven't run it yet: we will need to look at ways to helping the people involved continue on their spiritual journey and grow in their relationship with Jesus, the Church and fellow Christians.