

All aboard!

In his recent book, "Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission", Fr James Mallon writes:

*'The Church of God is missional. It is a bus that is designed to go. For centuries, however, these local "buses" have sat in parking lots. They have been maintained and decorated. People gather to sit in them for one hour a week, and some even drop in during the week, but most of the buses have never gone out. When a pastor starts the engine and calls "all aboard", those who receive the invitation must be told where the bus is going so they can decide whether to be on board'.*

The point Fr Mallon is trying to make is that the mission of Church is to lead people to a living, vibrant, personal relationship with God that consumes and fills our lives with His love and joy, and the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth. Leading people to Christ requires a journey to be made, and each parish church family, in leading people to Christ, will have their own particular destination and stops to make on the journey. He rightly points out that it is important to tell people not only the final destination, but also the stops on that route and how we will get there.

I have to confess that I am finding his book challenging reading, and at the time of writing this article have not yet finished reading the book because it is so thought provoking. Fr Mallon is open and honest about the mistakes he has made in his own ministry, and of the challenges he and his own congregation have faced. He writes enthusiastically about his experience of working with other denominations, the success of initiatives such as the Alpha Course, and the need for churches to recognise that we are all called to get on the mission bus and take the journey. There is, as he has suggested above, no point having a gleaming finely tuned bus with a powerful engine if it never travels anywhere.

One could argue of course that many church "buses" are in need of a thorough service and an oil change, and need some restoration work to the engine before getting under way. In that sense one does need to be prepared for the journey ahead, but the important point is that any journey requires a destination, and if we are not to get lost on the way, a road map and set of directions for us to follow.

Up and down the country, parish churches are faced with this dilemma. To use Fr Mallon's analogy of today's Church, the days of the bus being able to be left in the parking lot because lots of people would come and sit in it once a week are long gone. Society has changed, understanding of religious faith has changed, and in terms of the mission of the Church in bringing people to Christ, the Church "buses" need to now get out on the road.

So what route shall we take in this parish, and what is our destination? What is our vision as a church family in Southbourne, Dorset? Modern buses often have on the front a sign that gives its final destination and its next stop on the route. What would our sign say, and would it encourage people to get on board? What can we learn from other churches and Christian groups in deciding our route forward? The vision for our church family in how we move forward must first be discerned and then shared, and reviewed as we go.

So I would encourage you, if you want to help me and others in the process of making our map forward and setting our first destination, to give the matter careful thought and prayer. Perhaps some of you might like to read Fr Mallon's book and see what ideas and strategies he suggests might work well in our church family and in our community. Many churches now have a mission statement, but often these tell only what the church is doing, and not where the church is going. Coming to know God is a spiritual journey, and many people in the world want to make that journey, but perhaps are unsure how, or where to even begin. Helping people begin that journey, and journeying with them as we ourselves travel the road of faith, is a responsibility that all in our church share. So, let's fill up the tank, look at the road atlas of life, the bible, and set the first destination. We may be surprised who decides to get on board with us as we travel along.

Fr Kevin