

Mothers' Union address to Synod 2016

So when you hear 'Mothers' Union' what do you think of? My guess that is something like this - teapot plate of cakes – and several old ladies with white hair and fixed ideas of just how the vicar should do it. I guess you don't think of Downing Street or the United Nations, however, that is just where you are likely to find members of Mothers' Union or maybe running a mile or a marathon, jumping out of a plane or sitting in a bath of beans.

Ever since Mary Sumner started Mothers' Union in 1876 in the Old Alresford vicarage Live, pray and serve has been at the heart of the organisation. Its purpose was to encourage parents in caring for their children, not just physically and mentally but also spiritually. Right from the beginning, one hundred and forty years ago, it was recognised that strong relationships and the role of the family, however defined, are crucial in building healthy communities.

So where and why would you find us at Downing Street and the UN. It is through the campaigns we have been engaged with – Bye Buy Childhood, Violence against women and girls, Flexible Families – MU campaigning for all employees to have the right to request flexible working. MU campaigns for social justice for those on the margins and for greater recognition of the value of stable family life Yes it is political but surely we should be speaking out wherever we see injustice or situations that damage family life and relationships

This is only a small part of the work of Mothers Union and of Mary Sumner House the headquarters in London and then there is the work of Mothers' Union throughout the 83 countries around the world. The work in these countries address the need only they can identify in their situations. For example in Zambia and South Africa Mothers' Union is participating in Health Education, to help eradicate malaria, working across boundaries and borders and working alongside the Anglican Men Society and JC Flowers Foundation. In Uganda cases of domestic violence has reduced since Mothers' Union in the Diocese of South Ankole undertook a programme of raising awareness, marriage counselling and Radio Talk shows. There are so many examples of actions of the MU across the world that are changing the lives of women and families, parenting classes, AIDS awareness, changing the finances that enables people to support themselves.

So what of MU in Portsmouth? Bishop Christopher commissioned me as Diocesan President of Mothers Union in Portsmouth on 20th January 2016. I am totally new to the board of trustees but not to MU and I have to say it has been a huge learning curve. We have to produce a 'Three Year Plan' to help us in the years ahead. We identified a great deal going on throughout the diocese. Some of the activities or support are based in the parish of the particular branch and some are targeted in the wider community of the diocese and are in partnership with outside agencies.

Let us take the wider community first. Most of these projects come from the Diocesan board of trustees but are supported by the branches. We run 'Wedding Fairs' in doing these we occasionally go to church based or run fares but we promote Church weddings at commercial Wedding Fares. There is a team of members who have a rota to cover all the Fares throughout the year. Then there are the members who take their turn to bake a wedding cake to be raffled at each Fare. The team attend about 7 Wedding Fares each year.

We produce menu cards for the food banks and members take these to food banks in their area – not all will accept them I think, but haven't investigated, it all depends who runs the food bank.

Portsmouth Street Pastors have been supported by MU. We have provided flip flops for them to distribute. Members help out at the Roberts Centre and also at the Child contact Centre run from the Roberts Centre that allows estranged parents safe contact with their child/children. We provide hand-made gowns for QA for the neo-natal unit and comfort teddies for children in A&E or in a trauma situation. Most of the branches gather toiletries for the toilet bags for use at QA 's A&E for people who are taken there as an emergency and had no washing facilities. A new project we have just undertaken in conjunction with Alzheimers Society is to produce 'twiddlemuffs' for those suffering from dementia. These are knitted muffs with buttons and cloth sewn in produced in different colours for men and women. Oh and of course, I can't end our work for the wider community without mentioning AFIA, Away from It All. Holidays We used to be able to provide week long holidays for families but over the years the cost of these got higher and higher and we came to the conclusion that we could no longer afford to continue these. So last year we tried a new approach. We wanted to reach out to more families in need of time away from it all. We decided to offer

days out which would be paid for my Mothers' Union but the families could have an input into where they would go. Families of any sort would be eligible to request a day away they do have to be in need of some sort. Families can be of any age, couples needing to get to see distant relatives ... we are keen to look at new initiatives.

Of course, that isn't all the MU does there are the individual branches each with their own undertakings or none. Yes, many of us do have white hair and many are nearer 80 than 70. Oh and we do like a cup of tea and cake and often can be relied on to provide it for the parish. However, MU members are involved in many other church activities – Messy Church, marriage and baptism support, baby and toddler groups, fund raising, bereavement group. Meetings always contain prayer time and prayer underpins all our activity. Mid-day prayer in the Cathedral on the third Wednesday is led by our Chaplain, Venerable Trevor Reader. At any one time across the world there are Mothers' Union members praying. This week in our booklet 'Families Worldwide' the theme is forgiveness.

My request to you is that you encourage your MU branch, if you have one, you might find that they are of use to you rather than a burden and remember that some of them have been faithfully living out LIVE – PRAY – SERVE for more than 50 years. If you ask them they will pray for you and for your ministry.