

Worldwide President Address – General Meeting 2019

I feel that now is the perfect moment for us to acknowledge God's presence in our midst as we move on with our programme and I do so with words from Psalm 86:12

"We will praise you, O Lord our God with all our hearts and we will glorify your name evermore" Amen!

What an amazing opportunity we have in our gatherings, to acknowledge God's presence in prayer and worship wherever we are placed! And even further to confess that the core of our existence has been designed by God as we serve as his hands and feet here on earth.

I can think of no greater privilege than this as Mothers' Union continues to place God at the centre while proclaiming a faith based, all-inclusive, global movement.

Recently I spoke at the Annual Dinner for a Service Organisation overseas and one person said; "We like the way Mothers' Union is able to express their faith openly in a deep way – we say our prayers too but we just read them we do not feel them like you do." This speaks volumes doesn't it?

As I greet you this morning, I do so with so much love in my heart and in gratitude for the warm welcome I received yesterday at Portsmouth Cathedral and now here today.

This is my very first visit to Portsmouth and my first huge gathering of members from all over Britain and Ireland and believe me when I say there is no other place I would rather be than with you today this has really been a year of firsts for me and Mothers' Union!

I thank you for being here, for all you do for Mothers' Union, all you have done to make this event a reality and for inviting me to be your keynote speaker this morning.

I love being in Mothers' Union gatherings because something electrifying happens when members gather together like this

- There is a sudden surge of energy that comes from the preparation
- The excitement of the journeying together by coach, train or car – not forgetting the packed lunches – I am convinced that no one else can feed the 5,000 like Mothers' Union!
- The renewal and togetherness of lasting relationships
- Marvelling at the lives we touch through our work
- Praying together as we look for God's guidance and blessing to shape the future.

I believe there is no other experience that can give us such pleasure, such satisfaction and this my friends, comes from experiencing God's unconditional love and our commitment to serving Him and those around us.

Mothers' Union is very much alive and vibrant - a dynamic force that is relevant to changing environments in today's world!

And as we speak of changing environments ...

I immediately recall our response to the aftermath of the bombings in Sri Lanka where our members visited, listened and prayed with the families. They identified some orphans and have now put a plan in place to give monthly financial assistance towards their education.

In areas where Mothers' Union has been working closely with communities to build resilience and help recovery from natural disasters like Madagascar, following the flooding and devastation created by cyclones each year. In the Diocese of Mahajanga, for example, communities experience both drought and flooding and this creates huge uncertainty. So they decided to address the issue of environmental preservation ... and have chosen to cultivate a plant called Vetiver a fast-growing grass that preserves the soil during the rainy season. After the Vetiver is uprooted, trees that fertilise the soil and store water in their trunks are planted as they also provide great barriers when the cyclones hit.

The Vetiver grass has the potential to support livelihoods - it can be used as cattle food, material for roofing houses, members can make handicraft to sell and interestingly it can clean water. Our members have proven that we are good at disaster risk reduction and at the same time helping families to transform their own lives - this gives us a future!

In situations like these, we are all made stronger because of our faith and lives devoted to prayer. Have you ever stopped to imagine 4 million of us members in prayer when disaster strikes? Half of the world praying in the daytime and the other half at night time? So there is no rest I think God probably says ahhh it's Mothers' Union again, let me get them sorted quickly, if not, I won't be able to rest on the 7th day. My friends this is the power of prayer!

[*] Having worked hand-in-hand with passionate members in several Provinces around the world including isolated Dioceses like Temotu, deep in the Pacific where they still barter and with fresh expressions of Mothers' Union like AMARE in the Chaco of Argentina, I can confidently say that our members are strategically placed to transform families and communities.

I remember some years ago Mothers' Union brought together 4 indigenous tribes for a parenting workshop in a place called Ingenero Juarez in Argentina the aggressive Tobos were very tall huge people with the power and the gentle Wichis were so calm and avoided conflict at all costs. The other two tribes were in between. By the end of 9 days of working together the tribes had put aside their differences simply because they were required to depend on each other in the practical assessments and finally understood the importance of working together. It has been almost 7 years and the transformation is visible, AMARE has grown in membership and the Peace and Reconciliation process has been ongoing with the tribes working and making a difference together.

May I also add here that it is your generous giving and fundraising for decades that has helped this process and many more around the world. To have a feeling

of satisfaction and knowing you are making a difference is one thing but to actually be on the ground with our members who are on the receiving end with grateful hearts is beyond words to describe. I stand here on behalf of members around the world who have been helped for years by your faithful prayers and generous giving. To say thank you from the bottom of my heart. And as you continue to make a difference, not only overseas, but also here in Britain and Ireland where it is so much needed today I pray for God's blessings on you.

I have completed almost 9 months as your Worldwide President – WOW that's gone quickly! I have witnessed the incredible impact of Mothers' Union work while visiting 11 Dioceses in Canterbury and Wales.

Just over a week ago, I visited Parc Prison in Llandaff Diocese and what an experience it was! Just going through security was quite overwhelming. I could hear a mother bravely saying to her 14th month old toddler, "Look! We are going to see Daddy!" As we entered the Family Centre where the visits take place the Dads were sitting each to a little table with 2 chairs. I will always remember the look of great expectancy on their faces. As you can imagine the little 14 month old toddler just bounded in, ran to his Daddy and what a reunion it was! I tried my best to fight back the tears but the floods came down.

On a much brighter side what role was MU playing in Parc Prison? Usually the family visits last for two hours but children would find it very difficult to sit for two hours. This is where I met the incredible Mothers' Union angel Jodie, Jodie has been working in the Prison Family Care Centre for 11 years, ministering to families and getting large donations to purchase toys for the children's play area. The toys have to be replaced frequently as they are about 2,000 visitors per month.

Jodie volunteers and gives of her time to keep the children entertained while the parents have a chance to chat. She said with tears in her eyes there are so many delicate periods during the two hour visit with the final five minutes being the most important. This is when Jodie has to stop the play and gently get the children to go and say good bye to their Dads. I have only been into cold dark prisons with MU overseas Llandaff Diocese and Jodie have made this prison a home away from home. May God bless the work of the Mothers' Union Prison Ministry everywhere!

Now can I ask - when last have you had a chance to look at our wonderful, colourful magazine, Families First and our very modern Website? Believe me when I say that our MU literature is invaluable! It reaches places where we do not even think it reaches and impacts hearts in a life changing way. I met 10 year old Beth in Bangor Diocese. She said to me; "I know who you are because I read my Grandma's MU magazines" so I asked her "would you like to become a member of Mothers' Union one day?" She boldly replied; "I want to be a President like you one day"! After this encounter with Beth, I am looking forward to meeting Mini MU in Liverpool in November.

You will remember that the Church of England Synod was held in York, just recently in July. For the first time Mothers' Union was invited to address Synod in the opening session in addition having a well-equipped booth and a fringe session. Through these activities we had the opportunity to interact with the Archbishops of York and Canterbury, the Clergy and Laity representatives. All spoke of a well-

respected and valued Mothers' Union here in Britain and Ireland and the amazing work that is being done overseas. Just a week and a half ago I was invited to enroll five members of Clergy into MU – four men and one woman. All spoke highly of MU and its work.

I am confident that MU is making a difference in the Church's mission and ministry and members are making the necessary strides to remain committed, faithful disciples and followers of Christ. I am very much looking forward to our Guest Speaker, Reverend Barry Hill, also a member of Synod, who is going to speak to us more about this later on this afternoon.

Our members are always being challenged wherever they are, I believe this is normal when working for God because it is our weakness He is made strong. Some years ago in parenting groups, our members in remote hinterland communities were reporting a high incidence of child abuse, sexual violence, in fact, violence in all its forms against women and children. I was the Diocesan President at the time when these reports first surfaced and I can tell you we were not equipped to deal with this. Other agencies did not have the capacity to travel to remote communities and tackle this problem. So it was Mothers' Union to the rescue and leading the way! A team from MSH travelled to Guyana and held a workshop and out of this, the first Code of Ethics and Child Protection Policy for my home Diocese Guyana was developed and accepted by Synod in 2014. Since then communities have been sensitised to take appropriate action and government interventions are now in place. Indeed a huge step in the right direction as Mothers' Union globally reaffirmed this at our recently concluded Worldwide Council and agreed on the need for creating safe spaces.

It would be remiss of me if I did not make special mention of our existing members who continue to exhibit unconditional love, passion and commitment to our movement and inspire others to join. On my visit to Chichester Diocese I sat around the dinner table with some of the Trustees, they were all lovely, but one in particular caught my eye because she was so young in her 30s and I was curious to know how she became a General Trustee at such a young age and this is Haley's story – she started going to church 11 years ago and began attending MU meetings with her friend's mother who was the Branch Leader. She saw the ladies at Church wearing their badges and wanted to be a part of the group, as they were the ones who were always involved in doing everything in Church. Not long after becoming a member she was invited to join the committee and became a General Trustee in January this year.

What a simple yet effective way to attract new and younger members and even more to encourage them to be future leaders. My friends let us be branches, members and leaders that seek to encourage others to join us and be a part of something special. It is through little deeds like these that I am reminded that we must always act as though we are living proof of a loving God.

I am sure you will agree with me that all of our stories are not as glowing as we would like them to be, I had a conversation with a lady who shared her sad story of being shunned by Mothers' Union at a time when she needed them most at a time when her husband was overseas, when she was left with her young children for long periods, and not knowing if he make it home.

Sometimes we fall short of our values and what is expected of us and we all are guilty of this at one time or another but when occasions like these arise, we must be Christ-like, with the gentle heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the boldness of our founder Mary Sumner – in times like these we must put aside the rules and regulations and act with compassion and love. Jesus said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so must you love one another. Sometimes it can be difficult – but God is calling for us to be intentional and purposeful in every way for a bright and sustainable future.

And with this the question we all ask now is - where do we go from here?

In June, at our recent Worldwide Council it was evident that MULOA – Mothers' Union Listens, Observes and Acts is indeed a gift from God – giving our beloved MU just what it needs at this present time in our history. MULOA renews, revitalises, reenergises and refocuses members wherever they are geographically. It has shown us that our joys and challenges, our needs and wishes are so similar in our aspirations to reach out together with the love of Christ and make a difference where it matters most.

We recognise that as a movement our relationships with God and trust with each other must be restored and nourished before we can move forward with confidence.

The way in which MULOA has successfully evolved across the globe is evidence that God has been preparing us for this journey, the destination is ahead of us and it is even greater than all we can expect or imagine. All we have to do is to get on the right boat together, prayerfully and in unity, rowing together in a timely manner, and keeping our focus on the one who has commissioned us. If we find we are fighting for space in the boat and getting upset with those around us - then we must recognise that we are working in our own strength and in this case, we need to take a step back, let go, have some patience and act in step with God.

I am confident of this because of God's promise in Philippians - He who began the good work among you will see it to completion.

So it does not matter where we are placed geographically, what resources we have, whether the work is plenty and the labourers are few, nothing else matters except that we are steadfast in faith and committed to our ministry in Mothers' Union.

What joy it is for us to be part of a family that transforms hearts, lives and communities - in step with God!

Let us go forward boldly in hope and with the confidence that we are living proof of a loving God. I have never been more hopeful about the future of Mothers' Union as I am today.

My brothers and sisters, knowing Christ and making him known brings a peace that surpasses all understanding and releases joy everlasting.

I thank you ... and may God bless you all.