

The Mothers' Union Vision: the transformation of communities worldwide

A sermon for the Service of Thanksgiving and Celebration for 130 years of Mothers' Union (14/07/2018)

“The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few: therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10.2).

One of my favourite television programmes as a child was Mission Impossible. I continued to like the more recent series of films. I love especially the part at the beginning where the team are given their clear but difficult task. The message always contains the words: “Your mission if you choose to accept it”. It always ends with “This tape will self destruct in five seconds”. There was a short time about ten years ago when I had the Mission Impossible theme as my mobile phone ringtone but it led to too many strange looks on trains.

It's a joy to be here at this service of Thanksgiving and Celebration for the life of the Mothers' Union in the Diocese of Oxford over 130 years.

Thanks be to God for all that has been achieved down the years in the support of family life: for the countless ways in which family life has been strengthened; for practical service offered; for support to families in prisons and hospitals; for international links; for faithful prayer; for funds raised for good causes; for the great saints of God who have led this Mothers' Union and who have gone before us as a great cloud of witnesses. Thanks be to God for those who lead it still particularly for Alison our President and Maureen our President elect. Thanks be to God for all that is offered in this service to his glory.

That note of thanksgiving and celebration is reflected elsewhere throughout this service. I want to focus my remarks this afternoon on the future and looking forward. Where should your priorities lie now in 2018? What would Mary Sumner say to us if she could offer words of wisdom today? Two things.

The first can be said very briefly but I believe it is really important. Don't worry about your membership numbers and recruitment to the Mothers' Union. Don't worry about a declining number of local branches or attendance at meetings. Focus instead on your mission.

Perhaps I don't need to say that to you but I have noticed down the years that the Mothers' Union generally, in my experience, can be more concerned about numbers and recruitment than about fulfilling its objectives. This is understandable. But I believe it is mistaken.

A smaller, active Mothers' Union working towards your vision and mission and five objectives is worth more in a parish or in a deanery or in a diocese than a large Mothers' Union which has a lot of people at meetings but does very little.

A Mothers' Union which is outwardly focussed and working on these five objectives together will attract far more of the right kind of members than a Mothers' Union which exists simply to hold monthly meetings. A Mothers' Union which is outwardly focussed and working on these five objectives together may not need to hold many meetings at all. The meetings they did hold would be focussed very tightly on these aims. But they may do a power of good in all kinds of ways.

Don't worry about how many members you have. Jesus sends out the 72 disciples in pairs. Two or three people in a parish are enough to accomplish great things. Read the story of Gideon's army. A small committed group will always accomplish more than a large group

that does not know what it is for. Focus instead on your unique mission – as you do that the right people will want to join you.

So what are your objectives? What is your reason for existing? In different language what is your mission?

In a moment you will make an act of commitment to your vision and mission. These are both printed on the service sheet. But the Mothers' Union also has five objectives.

They are clear, specific and vitally important for Church and society. They should be the reason people join the Mothers' Union and the reason people hold office within it. Perhaps I should have arranged for the Mission Impossible theme tune to play at this point in the sermon.

You are committing yourselves today:

- To promote and support married life
- To encourage parents in their role to develop the faith of their children
- To maintain a worldwide fellowship of Christians united in prayer, worship and service
- To promote conditions in society favourable to a stable family life and the protection of children and
- To help those whose family life has met with adversity.

This is your mission if you choose to accept it. It means there is a big agenda. A huge amount of work to do. The transformation of communities worldwide.

The Mothers' Union needs to be at the forefront of marriage education and preparation and parenting courses. The Mothers' Union has a vital role in connecting with young parents, in encouraging the church to be involved in "under fives" provision and children's centres. Local Authority support for these vital services is collapsing. The Mothers' Union has a part to play in supporting and

linking with schools and youth centres. You have a role in encouraging work with children and young people in churches as we support parents in developing the faith of their children.

The Mothers' Union has an vital campaigning role seeking the kind of society which supports a stable family life in all its diverse forms. You have an important part to play in the current safeguarding debates in church and society. You have a contribution to make in promoting digital health and the combating damage being done by social media. There is a mental health crisis among children and young people.

You have a vital part to play in supporting those whose family life has met with adversity: in prisons, in hospitals, among migrants and asylum seekers, with those who are simply enduring hard and difficult times.

I hope these five objectives are read regularly at Branch meetings and Committee Meetings and special events. I hope they shape your work.

They represent a massive and urgent agenda for the Mothers' Union in the 21st Century. They are something of an impossible mission. We look at the task and we look at the resources we can offer and they seem so few.

But that is exactly the place of Jesus as he sends out first the 12 and then the 72 in all the towns and cities where he was to go. That is exactly the place of Mary Sumner as she determined to do something to support family life in her day. The sending out of the 72 seemed a hopeless mission but it sowed the seed for the birth of the early church. Mary Sumner's prayers and call and organisation led to a worldwide movement to support family life which endures to this day.

In our generation what will we now do? Do we say these problems are too big for us? That we are too few or too frail? I hope not. I hope that we will today commit ourselves again to Mary Sumner's vision to support and build up marriage and family life in many different ways and to play our part in this long chain of love and prayer.

Thanks be to God for all that has been. Don't be concerned about membership or numbers. Focus on the vision, the mission and the task that God has given you. Pray the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers to his harvest.

You are called as members of the Mothers' Union to transform communities and change the world. In the words of the anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has”