

## **Address by Phyllis Grothier**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

When I began to prepare for today there were many things on my mind; very great sadness as I saw Maureen come towards the end of her most courageous battle against illness. Maureen has been a dear friend to me over a number of years, particularly while I was Diocesan President and she was Branch Leader in Kilkenny and later Diocesan Secretary. Maureen displayed a sharp wit; wonderful loyalty and deep faith. She served Mothers' Union faithfully and with great vision. Maureen succeeded me as Diocesan President, not out of a desire for a public role but in order to serve an organisation she loved at a time when no one else was forthcoming. She gave unstintingly and was determined to be here today. It is our faith that she is and that she can no longer feel pain or distress. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Eighteen months ago, on the first Sunday in March, I accepted the office of All Ireland President of Mothers' Union, the Lord being my helper. There was a suggestion during the Sermon that one could be considered DAFT to enter the public square and to engage in debate at the present time. May I just say, My Lord Bishop, that there have been many times over the past months when I would agree that DAFT was the word. However.....

Over twenty years ago I sat in Fenagh Church one Sunday morning, probably feeling a little smug, after all the roast was in the oven and all the family were in the pew – Canon Charlie Ruddock leaned across the pulpit and asked “If you were accused of being a Christian would there be evidence enough to convict”? I can't claim that it was a light bulb moment (isn't that the modern term) but it has remained somewhere in my mind ever since. It has a particular significance at the present time when we think of many of our sisters and their families who struggle to survive in regions of the world where to be Christian is a dangerous business. Just a few years ago we celebrated the opening of a Mothers' Union Branch in Baghdad and today there are just over 3,000 members in Iraq.

Tomorrow we celebrate the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, someone who accepted God's call and could say with Joy "My Soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour". Mary, a woman and therefore considered inferior would remain faithful at all times; she would become a refugee as many are today; she would experience the helplessness of seeing her child die at the hands of powerful men even as many Mothers do today

Mothers' Union at its best, is the best!!! Sowing the future together is the theme for 2014, so how do we do that? It is vital that we remember our purpose and not become fixated on whether our Branch is large or small, we are part of an active, dynamic and above all praying organisation. We cannot afford to become insular and isolated in our own area, just visit our website, consider our Wave of Prayer and know that at some point each year each one of us is being remembered in prayer by our fellow members.

When Mary Sumner founded this organisation, it was a marvellous outlet for women whose social lives outside the home were so restricted. Thousands joined and enjoyed fellowship, support, friendship and worship. But now we are living in different times, the younger women of today could not even begin to understand the lives lived by our grandmothers and their generation. They are not looking for something to fill their time – time poverty is a real issue.

We are often inclined in Mothers' Union to remain doing something because that is the way it has always been done or what is even more damaging NOT to do something because it has never been done!!! Methods of communication have changed; younger women are torn in so many directions through work, family and all the activities that children are signed up to; grannies aren't sitting in the corner waiting to be entertained – they are probably child minding or holding down a job; many women who, 40 years ago would have found Mothers' Union to be the only way they could share their faith, are now ordained and ministering in parishes. If we become locked in our past and former means of doing business we are going to disappear yet we must never lose that link to our past and to our Christian values and instruction given by Jesus himself to "love God and your neighbour as yourself" – showing Christian Care for families world wide.

I would like to look a little deeper into our place in society today; situations may have changed but Mothers' Union charge to show Christian care for families has not, it is not, you will notice, simply care for Christian families. Has the need for that care changed? Do families need support? I leave that with you!

What has changed in society since Mary Sumner's time.? There is more mobility, communication is easier, but we have:

Debate about equality and yet people are relying on food banks for food;

Christians talk about compassion and deliver judgement

We speak about care and see people's lives ruined through addictions and violence.

Our towns and cities are dangerous places and violence seems to be accepted.

Society seems to be divided and people who would, in the past, have provided support and assistance are now at their wit's end as they struggle to meet commitments.

I read recently that "children are now growing up with parents who have not experienced parenting themselves".

We speak about Fair trade and yet producers are at the mercy of market flux; subsistence farming is widespread across the world; clothes are produced under sweatshop conditions.

I would not be a member of Mothers' Union if I didn't believe passionately in the message delivered through our logo "Christian care for families worldwide". I believe passionately in the love shown by Christ for each one of us and in the love shown by Mothers' Union members around the world through our Parenting Programmes, Family Life Programme and HIV/AIDS programmes all helping families in the daily struggle to live.

Tomorrow is World Literacy Day and the Mothers' Union Literacy and Financial Education Programme is in operation in Malawi, Ethiopia, Burundi. The programme in Burundi has been supported by Bishops' Appeal while the Overseas Contribution from our Mums in May Fundraising project supported the Literacy project in Sudan and South Sudan where, despite all of the conflict and turmoil, last year over 7,000 people were made literate through this

programme. We are joined by some friends from the Isle of Man today and I would like to say well done to members of Sodor and Man who not only raised funds for projects in Malawi but persuaded their government to support it also!!!

Mothers' Union believes that any culture of violence against one another, whether physical or emotional, is a distortion of relationships as originally intended. Violence against women and girls is any act of violence that results in harm, suffering or indignity to women. Violence is 'gender-based' when it is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or when it affects women disproportionately. It can include physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse; harmful cultural practices and mass acts of violence such as rape by combatants in war. It is estimated that between 23 to 37 per cent of women across the world experience violence, and it happens regardless of class, race, religion or age.

Members, don't just believe but behave justly. Last year members in Ireland contributed £132,000 to Worldwide and Relief Projects. The recent audit of Mothers' Union project in Ireland has yielded several pages of projects ranging from child contact centres, prison visitor centre support, Knitting, prayer groups, nursing home visiting. I share an excerpt from a letter from Kelda, manager of a Children's Creche supported by one of our Dioceses - she says: I am writing to let you know the difference the Mother's union has made to our centre. "For many of our children, poverty, crime and the effects of unemployment is part of their everyday lives. . We believe that our service can make a valuable difference to children and can ensure that they have the skills to break the cycle of poverty.

I could go on . So many people who believe in what we stand for. Our Christian care has to be for one another in order to be able to, as we say each time in the Mothers' Union prayer "reach out as your hands across the world".

. Everyone one of us has Mothers' Union and the benefits that it brings firmly written on our hearts, we may have different ways of expressing our care, that is down to our personality but each one of us here this evening has ability, talent, faith and knowledge and I ask everyone to place these gifts at the disposal of Mothers' Union and make our plans so exciting that we draw

people towards us and that above all we share “Christian care for families; for our members and for one another.

Daft by the way:

Daring: Are we willing to be daring – in a consumer driven world where success is to often measured by possessions and money – are we willing to enable, encourage and support those who are in trouble? Will we enter the public square and challenge injustice in its many forms? Will we listen to those who feel unloved and unwanted and to those who feel that all that they have believed in is being thrown to one side?

Agreeable – Are we willing to work together for what is best for Mothers’ Union today, knowing that sometimes our strong belief in what has worked in the past may not be the answer today?

Faithful – Are we willing to be loyal, faithful and faith filled to the foundation stone of Mothers’ Union – faith in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and a willingness to acknowledge that all we do is based on that?

True – are we willing to be true to our vision to “bring about a world where God’s love is shown through loving, respectful and flourishing relationships.

Let us move forward with enthusiasm and be Daft together and should Canon Ruddock, or anyone else ask “Is there enough evidence to convict you or me of being a member of Mothers’ Union, we would be able to answer a resounding Yes.