



Mothers' Union General Meeting

**Report of weekend
News Letter feature on MU work
Archbishop of Armagh's
address**

Busy and enjoyable weekend reviewing MU ministry and mission

The weekend got underway underway on Friday afternoon with a reception at Belfast City Hall when guests included local dignitaries, representatives from other women's organisations and key Mothers' Union figures.



Delegates and local members filled the cathedral

Among them were Lynne Tembey Worldwide President, Phyllis Grothier All-Ireland President, members of the All-Ireland Trustee Board, Connor Trustee Board, Down and Dromore Trustee Board and Reg Bailey, Chief Executive of Mothers' Union.

On Friday evening, more than 1,400 ladies and guests attended a special service of celebration in St Anne's Cathedral. The choral evensong was led by the Dean of Belfast, the Very Rev John Mann, with the sermon from the Archbishop of Armagh and All Ireland Primate the Most Rev Richard Clarke.

Lessons were read by Lynne Tembey and Phyllis Grothier , and Intercessions will be led by the four All-Ireland Vice Presidents.

In his address, Archbishop Clarke said: "You have come to Belfast for this General Meeting and we are truly honoured and delighted to welcome you

here. And, as you may already have discovered, Belfast is a very attractive city.

“You have come, however, to a place that has known the terrible tensions and fears of civil violence over many years, and dangerous tensions and fears are still apparent, a full decade and a half after the Good Friday Agreement.



The Dean of Belfast, The High Sheriff of Belfast, The World President of MU and the All Ireland President

“We have still to find ways of working fully through a bitter legacy of past violence and the near disintegration of society. Part of that task will ultimately be to enable mercy and truth to meet together. The problem is that, as we survey the past, it is far too easy for us to want mercy to be manifest for ‘our side,’ but for truth to surface about ‘the others.’ And what is true for us in this Province is true in every place and every situation.”

The Archbishop continued. “The work that the Mothers’ Union does on these islands in prisons and with the families of those in prison, in giving hope where many have lost hope for themselves and for their families is emblematic of the task of going beyond a precise justice to a place beyond, where God’s mercy prevails.”



The World President with members at Belfast Cathedral

Archbishop Clarke’s full address is given in full later in this feature.

On Saturday the focus of the General Meeting moved to Belfast’s Waterfront Hall. The main purpose of the General Meeting – which is held in a different province each year – is to inform members of the work and activities undertaken in the previous year and to inspire them for the year to come, and it

gives members the opportunity to meet together and celebrate the work of the Mothers' Union.

Guest speakers were the Rev Chris Bennett, Chaplain of the Titanic Quarter, and Andy Kind, Comedian and Author

The General Meeting rotates around the five Provinces of Canterbury, Wales, Ireland, Scotland and York. It was held in Dublin in 2006 and in Belfast in 2000.

Bringing women together for God and for families - *Belfast Newsletter*



Lynne is pictured here with a little boy called Christian, whom she met on a visit to Kenya to see first hand the work of an initiative the Mothers' Union is involved in called the Church and Community Mobilisation Process

Lynne Tembey feels so passionately about the Christian work that the Mothers' Union does that at one point during our conversation, whilst talking about a particularly sensitive subject, she becomes tearful.

“Our Union members are ordinary, every day people doing extraordinary things for God,” she says, summing up perfectly the nature of those involved with this world-wide organisation, which is renowned for its endeavours

across the globe in all kinds of causes, from humanitarian to fellowship to emotional and spiritual support.

She adds with feeling: "My dream would be that every person in the world would want to join the Mothers' Union. The fun, the fellowship, the faith, the growth, the excitement - I could talk for the world about the Mothers' Union!"

West Cumbria born Lynne joined her local branch of the MU (in Whitehaven) when she was 23 and went on to hold a number of posts, before being made worldwide president last year.

"I grew up in West Cumbria; my husband David and I got married and moved down to Devon because of David's job," Lynne explains.

"He was a chartered accountant at the time, and I just really felt that once we had children, it would be good to have family around."

The opportunity to move back to Whitehaven arose, and the couple seized it. They threw themselves into community life, and Lynne was pleased to find that her attempts at getting involved in the local church and MU were welcomed, and not brushed off.

She reveals that her relationship with the church had blossomed from a young age.

"I knew about the Mothers' Union because as a child, I was taken to church. I just loved church life. In the early days I went to St Peter's Kells," she says, adding that she has always found church colleagues to be the back bone of a wonderful community", and "so supportive and caring."

She continues: "I suppose that nurture during the early years has made me the person that I am today. I've never been away from church, church has always been part of me and I've always been privileged, I feel, to be part of it. In the good times church life is wonderful, and in the bad times in my personal life - it has been my church friends to whom I've turned."

And she adds that she tries to lead a life that she feels is representative of that of a Bible-believing Christian.

"I would hope people would feel I'm a Christian, yes. I try to live my life in a way that I hope would make Jesus say, 'yes, that is what I would want from a disciple.'"

Initially, when Lynne and David moved to Whitehaven, Lynne "didn't really know an awful lot about" the Mothers' Union.



The All Ireland MU Banner in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast

"I knew there were ladies who did an awful lot in church," she says.

"I went to our church in Whitehaven and asked the curate if there was a young wives' group, and he directed me in a wonderful way. He opened the door for me, because as a young curate, he could have just said, 'yes, I'll get somebody to come and talk to you', and never got back to me. But he didn't. Then the assistant branch leader came to speak

with me.

"The more I found out (about the Mothers' Union), the more I wanted to be involved, and it is just such a powerful organisation."

Lynne says that at first, "the fun and the fellowship" appealed to her, and eventually, the realisation that these women "were on a Christian journey."

She adds: "I wanted to be on that journey too, I wanted to reach out as they were reaching out."

Since it was formed by Mary Sumner back in 1876, the Mothers' Union has been proactive around the globe in terms of Christian work and campaigns. We try to support marriage and family life, in practical ways, whatever that family consists of or its make-up is," says Lynne.

"We support those with faith, equally we support those with no faith at all, because we are instruments of God. We do campaigning - for example we have standing with the United Nations, we have our own accreditation, and to put it in a nutshell we try to speak out against injustice.

"We try to make governments see that life is difficult in some areas of the world, and I feel blessed and terribly humbled to have seen some of the poorest areas of the world."

Lynne says that "one of the wonderful initiatives" taken up by the Mothers' Union is the Millennium Development programme, which was launched because members wanted to celebrate the Millennium in special ways. As part of this, on a worldwide scale, the Literacy and Development Programme

was established, which helps communities to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. This empowers people living in impoverished countries, particularly women, for example, who Lynne says were often tricked out of their money in [the markets](#) when they tried to buy goods simply because they couldn't count.

"It really blew me away, how we are changing lives and have changed lives, and we will continue to do so, please God, for many years to come."

Today the programme is at work in Sudan, Ethiopia, Malawi and Burundi. Closer to home, Lynne recounts a story of how the warmth and kindness of Mothers' Union branches are impacting on families' lives which almost moves me to tears.

She was on the train home from an event when she fell into a conversation with an inquisitive male fellow passenger, who revealed that his own mother had been a member for many years, and asked her what they "were up to now."

Lynne filled him in about one project in which members made and brought in little gowns and shawls to hospitals for premature and stillborn babies.

The man's reaction both surprised and momentarily unnerved Lynne.

"He got really upset, and said, 'you know, I never, ever thought that I would be able to say thank you in person to the Mothers' Union. We lost a baby, we wanted to love that baby, but God had other plans for that baby. The MU wrapped our baby in love. Tell your members to keep on doing what they're doing.'"

And she adds: "I thought to myself, that's what we are about. We simply reach out with Christian love."

In her time as worldwide president, Lynne has travelled to places like Kenya, Barbados and Madagascar. Internationally, the organisation boasts four million members - although membership is declining - and has branches in 83 countries. The only criteria for joining, says Lynne, is "that you are baptised in the name of the Trinity" and that you promise to support the organisation's objectives.

She adds: "I could not envisage what life would be like if I wasn't a member of MU. In the good times, they've been amazing. In the bad times, without them, I would not be around. Our founder member Mary Sumner had this personal prayer:

All this day, O Lord
Let me touch as many lives as possible for thee;
And every life I touch,
Do thou by thy Spirit quicken,
Whether through the word I speak,
The prayer I breathe,
Or the life I live.
Amen

“And that is what I try to do every minute, every second, of my life - I try to live out that prayer. Being a member of the Mothers' Union is every part of my being.”

Archbishop Richard Clarke's sermon

**“Mercy and truth are met
together.” (Psalm 85.10)**

**The twentieth century
Russian poet Anna
Akhmatova brings together in
both her life and poetry the
dark and frightening side of
the earthly life that can
accompany motherhood.**



*The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All
Ireland*

Born one hundred and twenty
five years ago this year in
Odessa, she experienced all that Stalinism could bring to those who did not fit
into its totalitarian scheme of things. Akhmatova's husband Nicolai Gumilev
was one of the early victims of post-revolutionary Russia, and was executed
in 1921. Her son Lev was arrested in one of Stalin's many purges before the
Second World War, and for years Anna had no idea whether he was alive or
dead, as she searched for him. Until after Stalin's death, she herself was
expelled from Russian society as a writer who was regarded as a danger to

the communist state and so she was, for



more than twenty years, in effect a non-person in Stalin's Russia, a desperately dangerous place in which to find oneself.

In her prologue to what many would see as her great masterpiece, the poem "Requiem", Anna Akhmatova tells of life under constant surveillance and relentless harassment in Leningrad in the early years of World War II. As she stood in a prison queue waiting for food:

One day, somehow, someone recognised me. Then a woman standing behind me, her lips blue with cold, who, of course, had never in her life heard my name, came out of the numbness that affected us all and whispered into my ear (everyone whispered there) – 'Can you describe this?' And I answered – 'I can.' It was then that something resembling a smile slipped across what had once been her face.

In many ways, Akhmatova devoted her best and most lyrical poetry to exposing bitter truth, but always with generosity, with mercy: mercy and truth were indeed met together. But mercy and truth are all too rarely allowed to meet, even less to grow together. And I believe sincerely that the theme for the Mothers' Union in this year – "Sowing the future together" – invites you to bring together, as you can, those motifs of mercy and truth, and to sow a harvest of mercy and truth together for God's future.

The bringing together of the delivery of mercy with the pursuit of truth – that is your vocation. Without any intent at flattery, I know well that the Mothers' Union has, in many many places and over many years, done precisely that. It has been on the side of pursuing truth and justice for those who have been cruelly and cold-heartedly battered by systemic discrimination and calculated evil. Equally, you have sustained a sense of God's mercy and sacrificial concern for families, and particularly for children. And that can indeed be a perilous, lonely and dangerous place. Akhmatova's poem "Requiem" underscores the pain that can be endured on that journey, as she tries to discover her son's fate.

*For seventeen months I have been screaming,
Calling you home.
I've thrown myself at the feet of executioners
For you, my son and my terror.
Everything has become muddled forever –
I can no longer distinguish
Who is an animal, who a person, and how long
The wait can be for an execution.*

It is scarcely surprising that this was one poem that was not rehabilitated in Russia, even after Akhmatova had been restored to favour following Stalin's death and subsequent denunciation by the Communist Party of the USSR. To "speak truth to power" – to use a familiar phrase that has its origins with American Quakers – is always a dangerous business. To seek for truth with mercy is more dangerous still.

You have come to Belfast for this General Meeting and we are truly honoured and delighted to welcome you here. And, as you may already have discovered, Belfast is a very attractive city. You have come, however, to a place that has known the terrible tensions and fears of civil violence over many years, and dangerous tensions and fears are still apparent, a full decade and a half after the Good Friday agreement. We have still to find ways of working fully through a bitter legacy of past violence and the near disintegration of society. Part of that task will ultimately be to enable mercy and truth to meet together. The problem is that, as we survey the past, it is far too easy for us to want mercy to be manifest for "our side", but for truth to surface about "the others". And what is true for us in this Province is true in every place and every situation.

Sowing the future can only be done when – in biblical phrases – we love mercy, even as seek also to be led into all truth. Mercy is for the other, just as truth is to be about us. The work that the Mothers' Union does on these

islands in prisons and with the families of those in prison, in giving hope where many have lost hope for themselves and for their families is emblematic of the task of going beyond a precise justice to a place beyond, where God's mercy prevails. To give a further example from the wider Church mercy and truth meet in Malawi where Mothers' Union members run an agricultural project which is helping to fund the education of several dozen children while at the same time other members are raising public awareness on gender equality and gender-based violence. Again (and this is simply to give a further example from the work of a world-wide Mothers' Union), the Sri Lanka Mothers' Union supports a Blind Elders Home and also a skills development centre for the blind, while at the same time being active in public advocacy, with a particular concentration on the rights of children. Mercy and truth are met together. It is when you and I can make them meet together that we are sowing a worthwhile future together.

Within our own lives and the lives of our families we do almost seek instinctively to uphold and to bring together the values of integrity and generosity. And yet this may not be without pain.

On these islands, we live in a strange culture where good people can suggest, apparently unblinkingly and without any sense of the sheer depravity of what they are saying, that perception is more important than truth.

We live also in a peculiar society where mercy – true generosity of spirit – is seen as pathetic if not pathological. To counter this in our context is a task which makes massive demands on any who undertake it. It will often be a place both of misunderstanding and of loneliness. But it is following the path of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a supreme exemplar of the work for the Mothers' Union. The strident demand for truth and justice in the *Magnificat* leads on to the loneliness of a mother's love and mercy at Calvary, the place where Anna Akhmatova concludes her "Requiem":

*Mary Magdalene smote her breast and wept,
The disciple whom he loved turned to stone,
But where the mother stood in silence,
Nobody even dared look.*

But amidst those hurtful anxieties and the puzzling contradictions of daily life, you and I are always being called forwards and onwards by God, called in hope to a future which is His future, called to sow a harvest for future generations of his people, a joyful harvest for which mercy and truth are to be sown together with confidence and with courage. It is then that we will complete that verse from the psalms with which I began – *Mercy and truth*

are met together... righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

For that righteousness and peace we pray, and for that righteousness and peace we commit ourselves to work unceasingly, in sowing together those godly crops of mercy and of truth.

Photos: Revd Johnny McLoughlin