

President's remarks, council October 2023

Since Member's Day in September seven members from Gloucester Diocese have attended the MU Annual Gathering in York. This was a packed day, held at the York Barbican. We had travelled up the day before so, on the day itself, we were able to have a good breakfast before we walked to the Barbican. The meeting started with the usual welcomes from Bev (CEO) and June Houghton and Hilary Castle (York PP and DP respectively) and prayers said by Bishop John Packer, York provincial chaplain.

These were followed by an address by Worldwide President Sheran Harper. She encouraged us not to give up the habit of meeting together as this is an important part of MU. This is something we are doing today and continue to do in our branches.

The needs of women and families are increasing and MU is working to help. One result of re-imagining is that work is not always limited by national boundaries. There are variations in membership, both up and down. Recently Sheran enrolled 520 members in Mombasa, Kenya, after they had completed 5 months of training. Sheran said that we must meet potential members where they are and our doors must always be open.

Sheran had enjoyed a visit to Alresford on Mary Sumner Day this year, to lay flowers on Mary Sumner's grave and attend associated services and events. She shared some stories of other places she has visited and said we must be intentionally all inclusive and all-embracing and we must build partnerships.

2022-23 have been years of reconnection following Covid. Sheran was grateful for the technology which enabled us to keep in touch, both locally and globally, but she did think that she may be regarded as a computer-generated president during Covid due to the amount of time she spent on Zoom meetings. She assured us that the vision of Mary Sumner is very much alive within the context and culture in which MU operates.

With the 16 days of activism approaching Sheran shared some stories. For example, girls in Uganda aged 12-18 who she met at a group set up to help them. These girls were all pregnant due to child marriage, domestic abuse or rape. She said that it is our duty to speak out – domestic abuse is closer to home than we think and we must speak out.

She concluded with Isaiah 58, verse 11, 'The Lord will guide you always.'

If you think that the full speech was longer than the 20 minutes allocated in the programme you would be right! She spoke for an hour so the 1 hour 15 minutes

lunch break was shortened to 40 minutes – good thing we had taken our sandwiches – and the rest of the programme was re-jigged. We did get most of it in but it felt rushed. We had lots of news and updates and I will share some of these with you now. Any I don't share may be because they are covered elsewhere – or because I couldn't write fast enough to get it all down. Some are also covered in articles in Connected. Figures show that, worldwide, 3.4 million people benefited from MU work. Many of these figures come from MU live, where branches log what they have been doing and this has now been extended to include worldwide activities. Olga and I recently attended a Zoom meeting about this – it was a worldwide meeting so some of the participants had a very late night or early morning.

For those of you who use the internet, a new website is being planned – although this will not go live until 2025.

This year the make a Mother's Day appeal raised £87,000 and the Summer of Hope has raised £49,000 with money still coming in. The Christmas appeal will focus on Tanzania and details will be sent out in November.

Financial challenges are mounting and income is trending down. Expenditure is trending down too at the moment due to robust cost savings. The time when everything was covered by subscriptions is no longer sustainable, but the membership is obviously fundamental to the financial health of the organisation.

Before the pandemic there were major plans for Mary Sumner House but a review of these has been underway since late 2022. This review will include consideration of the disposal of Mary Sumner house, but this would need the appropriate member consultation.

Re-imagining continues and this was mentioned at various points. The steering group are focusing on three areas:-

1. Simplifying structures, including the Southwest cluster pilot)
2. Supporting our clergy
3. New membership categories, gifts and pilots, including church membership, a supporter option, and the challenge of domestic abuse.

You will continue to hear about these in the coming months, or read about them in Connected.

Bishop Emma Ineson, MU central chaplain, led a session. She talked about MU being bridges :-

1. Between the church and the rest of the world
2. Between clergy and MU members

3. Locally, provincially, nationally and internationally

To be bridges we need to be able to interpret what different groups are saying to each other and we need the gift of faith.

Bishop Emma had arranged for a small group of Diocesan Chaplains to share areas where they thought MU could engage with clergy to raise out profile in parishes – both where there are branches and where there aren't as many clergy know nothing about MU. The York Diocesan Chaplain said that clergy are unaware of what a support MU can be to them.

The new MU initiative against Domestic Abuse was launched at the meeting. This is designed so that activism takes place on 365 days a year, not just the 16 days we pray for in November/December. This initiative is called RISE UP:- Respond, Inform, Support, Empower, Unite and Pray and you can read about it in Connected. Following the meeting some members marched with placards from the Barbican to York Minster.

At the Minster we had a choral evensong and the sermon was preached by the Archbishop of York, who began by welcoming the 'mighty MU'. Among other things he talked of the morning of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene went to do 'what women did' and anoint the body of Jesus. There was no body so she ran to tell Peter and John – who ran to the grave, ran inside, ran out again and ended up (in the Archbishop's words) running round like headless chickens. Mary Magdalene, however, waited calmly and then met Jesus. The Archbishop felt that she would have been a member of MU if it had been around then. The importance of MU is of it being there and being available in time of need.

I will leave you with a quote from St. David that Bishop Emma shared with us. Be joyful. Keep the faith. Do the little things.