**London Diocesan Festival, 13th June, 2017**

May I thank the Chapter at St Paul’s for your invitation to speak in this amazing and iconic Cathedral, and thank you Margaret, fellow members and guests, for the opportunity to join this very special celebration.

At a time when we are all still coming to terms with the events in London and Manchester over recent weeks, I am particularly struck by the words in the first reading, “since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another”. It has been deeply heart-warming, in the midst of the darkness and suffering, to see people of all backgrounds and faiths, people like the taxi-drivers in both cities, coming forward to help others – ordinary people showing their love by doing extraordinary things.

In Mothers’ Union, our calling is to do just that – following in the footsteps of Mary Sumner to show our faith in action.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus says, “I was hungry, and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing “. Mothers’ Union in a nutshell! Here in London, I know that you do many, many things – last year I took part in a joyful community choir providing fellowship for the lonely; you run the 3 C’s – coffee, cake and chat for parents and children in Great Ormond Street Hospital - and I understand that you are now starting to work to support the men in the Heathrow Airport Detention Centre. Working quietly and without fuss is a very special trait of our members, as is the humbleness with which you do it, time and again I hear, “its just what we do”. Yes, it is – but you should never underestimate the difference you make.

A favourite story of mine is one about the boy on the beach and starfish:

An old man was walking along a shore after a big storm, which had washed up many starfish. As he walked, he saw a young boy, throwing starfish back into the sea. He asked the boy what he was doing and why – surely what he was doing could not make much difference? He could not possibly help all those thousands of starfish. As the boy threw one more back, far out to sea, he smiled and answered “it made a big difference to that one”!

.. and that is what you are doing all the time – thank you!

We all know one of the challenges we face is how to reach out to engage and enthuse others for our work, but I have never met anyone who is not amazed when they hear what members actually do.

I would just like to share one recent story, when I was asked to go out to a Parish in Thanet, to judge a Fashion Show being organised by some younger Mums.

I walked into a room with some 500 people, and it was absolutely buzzing! The younger Mums had reached out to partner with some 6 other community organisations, from Rainbows to The Shed, where retired men met for wood and metalcraft. All had stalls, all shared something of what they were doing, and there was great interaction across the generations. They met their target of raising £3000 for AFIA holidays – and they also had wonderful fellowship, and placed MU very much at the heart of the community. I met a lady, Mary, who had joined MU in the 1950’s. Her branch had reduced over time to just 4 members – but now they are 37, all ages and growing!

This is faith in action, this is reaching out, staying true to Mothers’ Union values but engaging in new ways – and having fun!

And here in London, you have been active in speaking up against social injustice. It was wonderful to be joined by members to take a petition with 4500 signatures to Downing Street last November, to call for the end of a charge for the use of the child maintenance service for victims of domestic abuse – the message was clear – its not OK!

And of course you continue to be most generous, showing your faith in action by raising funds to support the work of fellow members overseas. Just as here in the UK, all members work as volunteers, and fund their day-to-day activities themselves. The gift you give is to provide the “yeast” for training members to act as agents of change in their communities – helping them to help themselves.

A particularly striking example is in South Sudan. …where Mothers’ Union is continuing to work, in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges. Members are providing practical support on the ground, reaching people that others struggle to reach. According to the UN, there are now over a million internally displaced people – impossible for us to conceive. The conflict in this new country is not new… and the reason MU can continue to support is because members there have been working over the last 5 years, with funding from yourselves and Comic Relief, to build resilience through practical literacy, financial training and the development of savings and credit groups, linked to training individuals to speak up and speak out.

One such courageous advocate is Mama Elizabeth, who says:

“You know, we are blessed. God has given us great strength. We have also the intelligence to use it. But we work much harder than men, and we work for the good of our country, and for our families, and the way we work is violence to us. We work from early morning until night in the field and go home to cook. We can carry on working while we are pregnant, we have the baby in the field, and carry on working. This is violence to women. Our breasts nourish our children, who are the future of our country. If we cannot nourish them because we are starving, if they become sick and die because we cannot get healthcare, If we cannot educate ourselves, all this is violence against women. If we are married as children, and if we are raped and killed and our children are killed because of war, this is violence.”

Heartrending! Yet they persevere, and are making a real difference. Just like the boy with the starfish, they cannot solve all problems overnight, but your support is giving these fellow members the gift of empowerment and hope.

The external evaluator of the programme commented “MU is uniquely placed.It is “under the radar” and politically and socially agile. Its emphasis on family relationships makes it acceptable and potent. Its relationship to the church brings it to populations who are Hard to Reach and its gentleness of approach means that it can address questions that are Hard to Touch, such as power relations, tribalism and interpersonal violence”

She stressed “the MU in the Sudans is intrinsic to society. They do not evacuate their teams, or close their country offices. They do not leave. Building resilience and helping transformation is part of their ministry”. Wow!

Mama Elizabeth and her fellow members are living up to the messages in the readings in a way which I personally can barely conceive. And so are you - every small act of kindness and service is living that ministry – the parents in Great Ormond Street with their sick children will never forget the support of the 3 C’s; the funds you raise are helping Mama Elizabeth and those like her across the world to carry out their calling, and your prayerful support for those in need at home and across the globe is priceless.

We will be celebrating this when we all come together in Edinburgh in September, and Sarah Snyder, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Advisor on Peace and Reconciliation, herself now an MU member, will be exploring with us the unique role of Mothers Union members, women on the front line, in building peace and reconciliation across the world

As every day you show your Faith in Action, making a difference, one person at a time, may I thank you from the bottom of my heart - and may I close by saying the Mary Sumner 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