**Worldwide President’s Address for Church of England Synod, July 2019**

Good Afternoon!

It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to stand here as an Anglican Communion Representative, to address the General Synod of the Church of England. This is a dream come true as I have attended Diocesan Synod in Guyana …. both as the Recording Secretary and the Mothers’ Union Representative for a total of 12 years and hoped that one day I could experience another kind of Synod and here I am.

I extend my sincere thanks to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York for their ongoing relationship with Mothers’ Union and for giving us this amazing opportunity to be here … the first ever in the history of Mothers’ Union and in the life of General Synod.

Your Graces, on behalf of Mothers’ Union, I thank you.

I am Sheran Harper, the first Worldwide President of Mothers’ Union from outside the British Isles. At my Commissioning in February at Southwark Cathedral, the Archbishop of Canterbury challenged me to make Mothers’ Union known. He said, *‘no longer must Mothers’ Union be the best kept secret in the Anglican Communion’* …. and today I confidently stand at General Synod and **take on** this challenge to ensure Mothers’ Union is visible throughout the length and breadth of the Anglican Communion and beyond … and that our stories of impact which bring hope, life and a future are shared widely …. So others could be inspired.

I am sure you will agree with me when I say that the gift of Mothers’ Union is one of the greatest assets of the Anglican Communion. We are still existing even after 142 years with a vast network like no other … strategically placed at the heart of every community … well-positioned in 84 countries around the world … with a membership of 4 million … making us the number one, oldest and largest women’s movement in the world … all actively concerned with lasting transformation of individuals and communities, and working with people of all faiths or none. I believe our success is due to members being driven by a love for God and all humanity.

As part of my long and fulfilling journey of serving the Anglican Church and Mothers’ Union for over 32 years, I was blessed to visit over 20 countries as the lead of a key area of Mothers’ Union work – the parenting programme. Through this I was able to gain significant knowledge of the issues and challenges faced by the Church, and an understanding for the context and culture **within which** Mothers’ Union operates across the world.

I have experienced first-hand the benefits of Mothers’ Union and the Church working together with **one vision** in mission and ministry. I have the seen the capacity of indigenous Clergy and Church Leaders in very remote communities strengthened through Mothers’ Union Programmes …. not only in building the Church but also in encouraging transformation through women’s empowerment. Gloria in the Amazon experienced domestic violence in the home for many years **and now helped** by our programmes, she is a village councillor and has a say in the way government finances are spent in her village. She also ensures that the well-being of the family is priority on every agenda.

From 2012-2014 it was Mothers’ Union that led the process for the development of the first Code of Ethics and Child Protection Policy for the Church in my home Diocese, Guyana. This was necessary as parenting groups were reporting activities that warranted the establishment of such a Policy. The document was completed and accepted by Synod in 2014 …. In keeping with the continuing focus on Safeguarding ….. I am happy to report that just 2 weeks ago, Diocesan Synod in Guyana passed a resolution that the Code of Ethics and Child Protection Policy be revised and updated **for use** with immediate effect. Such are the benefits of us working together as one … in the Body of Christ. And indeed Mothers’ Union globally reaffirmed this need for creating safe spaces at our recently concluded Worldwide Council.

The opportunities to know Christ and make him known are numerous wherever we are placed, and Mothers’ Union is like the fertile soil that accepts us just the way we are. It nurtures us and helps us grow and discover the gifts and talents that we never knew existed … and even better, uses them for the furtherance of God’s Kingdom. It is on my Mothers’ Union journey that I have encountered Jesus countless times, so I know he is real and alive in our Anglican Church, in fact he is real and live everywhere.

As a member I have felt like a true missionary when I took off my shoes, rolled up my sleeves, and worked hand-in-hand with God’s people … in several countries, Bishops and members alike … reaching remote inaccessible communities by the Grace of God …. bringing the Gospel alive. I remember working deep in the Dry Chaco of Argentina and it was a Bishop (originally from England) who was my co- facilitator and translator … Because he and his wife chose to walk the journey with us, they continue to encourage unity in the midst of conflict … and peace and reconciliation among 4 indigenous tribes.

It was only last month that I met and embraced Mama Elizabeth, the Provincial President of South Sudan … who has lived through the ongoing ethnic conflict since 2013 …. with senseless killings that continue to destroy so many innocent lives …. leaving children orphaned and vulnerable to diseases, starvation and finally a heart-breaking demise. Mama Elizabeth, a strong advocate for peace and reconciliation, has played a key role in helping the Mothers’ Union and Church together amidst this turmoil.

It was Mama Elizabeth who led a delegation of 160 MU Leaders from South Sudan to a gathering in Northern Uganda in February … their first gathering in 10 years. They were women from warring tribes … not speaking to each other. But by the conclusion of their time together … they left healed and inspired, singing and dancing, and exchanging phone numbers. Such is the power of forgiveness and the joy of walking in the light. Just this morning, Father Joseph who is here with us said… ‘thank you for organising the gathering of the women, the Dioceses are now speaking to each other again.’ To God be the glory!

Many of us here will never have experienced the extremes of South Sudan but I am sure you can identify with a little town in England that Mothers’ Union and the Church have been working together. This town is facing challenges due to isolation and deprivation, with few employment opportunities. Mothers’ Union has been providing a safe space in a school where parents can gather for coffee, and with our members making themselves available to listen and lend support. This initiative is only a year old but one success story so far is that in addressing loneliness through this simple yet profound initiative … the result has been an adult Baptism held in that school.

As Mothers’ Union members we do so much more than just serve tea, coffee and cake …. It is tea, coffee and cake with a mission!

Nicky Gumbel said … *nothing comes close to the bonds of friendship that are built while breaking bread together*.

A few weeks ago I visited the Ministry of Cake at a Hospital in Chichester Diocese. They were pieces of cake lovingly baked, wrapped and placed in a little basket. But it is the ministry that went with the cake that moved me to tears.

The Chaplain and Mothers’ Union members said, *‘we not only pray and support the parents of babies of the Special Needs Unit who might not make it, but even the doctors and nurses come to us in the Chapel to be comforted, especially after losing a baby they had been caring for’.*

I saw and touched the angel pockets which are knitted prayerfully by the hands of our members …. for babies who do not make it, giving the parents a last chance to hold their precious little one … for just a moment longer. Such dignity I have not experienced anywhere else. My friends Mothers’ Union is alive in England! I have witnessed it over my past 6 months as Worldwide President.

After existing for over 142 years, like little old ladies … you can well imagine just how tired we were feeling. So 2 years ago the Holy Spirit gave Mothers’ Union a vision. We became very excited and typical of us as women we prayed and went straight for it, some of us giving our husbands no choice but to join us on the journey.

So over the past 2 years, we have been engaged in global conversations, listening to over 200,000 members around the world, so we could really understand our purpose in a modern society and in addition look at ways we could make a difference in the future.

This process culminated at our Worldwide Council in Rwanda last month. 72 global leaders representing 30 Provinces gathered. By the end of our week together, the voices of our members were very clear in recognising just how united we are despite our diversity – wherever we are in the world, the core of Mothers’ Union remains the same.

We are so sure that we want to make changes in gender justice, peace, safety and helping people to help themselves.

We recognised that very deeply rooted in our heart is a strong urge to restore relationships – with God, ourselves, each other and the environment. Our members **strongly** feel the need to connect and reconnect with the Church, and to building relationships that would enable us to work together for the furtherance of God’s Kingdom.

I am delighted to report that our global leaders left Rwanda feeling refreshed and revitalised in their identity, and with renewed confidence to reach out even more to others outside the church.

Already they are starting to do things differently, for example, in South Africa members have changed their way of working with street children; they have moved from just feeding them each day to partnering with the relevant authorities to **reintegrate** them into communities.

Members also said …

We have learned from each other’s Dioceses and Provinces in recognising the importance of working with and through the Church.

We have recognised that our own behaviours have not always been helpful.

We regret this and are now ready to listen and engage in the right way… and in a way that is beneficial to all.

For example, an exciting project which is developing with the church here in the UK is called Metamorphosis. So Metamorphosis is Mothers’ Union facilitating a process alongside the leadership of the Clergy. It is based on participatory Bible Study, which enables the laity and clergy alike …. to reflect on their calling … recognise the resources they already have …. and gain the confidence to reach out effectively in the community.

I think the results so far are exciting – for example, Sally gained the confidence to reach out to other churches and run a Service on the village green which attracted many, including dog walkers from the community.

And John commented on how reflecting on the story of the woman touching the Cloak of Jesus has helped parents in a primary school to open up and share their own stories of loneliness and isolation. They also recognised that God knew, loved and accepted them too.

If you would like to find out more about this new and inspiring initiative then I invite you to attend our fringe event on Saturday at 7.00pm. Members in the UK would love to explore with you how MU can work in this or other areas of your mission.

In closing and as I reflect, I am amazed at the way we are aligned to God’s plan and purpose for unity in the Church and wider community. Recently, a wonderful Bishop here in England asked me if I had a choice, what one thing would I like help with to make it a reality and my response was … I have experienced the immeasurable benefits of close working relationships between the Clergy and Mothers’ Union … so my greatest desire would be to see **even closer** working relationships and partnerships … between the Clergy and Mothers’ Union at Parish, Diocesan and Provincial levels ….

because I strongly believe that together we can move mountains … and achieve above and beyond **all we can ask** or imagine. I pray that we resist the temptation to be distracted by the challenges that face us ….. instead let us remain focused on the prize before us, and work together to ensure lives are filled with purpose and meaning, and at the same time bring more and more people to Christ.

Knowing Christ and making him known brings a peace that surpasses all understanding and releases joy everlasting.

May God bless the General Synod of the Church of England.

I thank you.

I am happy to field any questions which may arise from the floor.