



Keynote address for the Mothers' Union Worldwide Gathering, Durban South Africa, 2 October 2026, by The Right Revd Dr Vicentia Kgabe, Diocese of Pretoria

The Church as an Agent of Justice: from Charity to Transformation

We gather in Durban to celebrate 150 years of the Mothers' Union and to bear witness at a time when so much around us is unsettling. The global economy is uncertain. Governments and regional politics are unstable. Climate change is no longer something we speak of as belonging to the future; communities are already living with drought, floods, fires, food insecurity and displacement.

Across our continent and beyond, gender-based violence and femicide continue to rob women and girls of their lives and dignity. Wars displace families. Migration is increasingly treated as a problem rather than as the movement of human beings seeking safety, dignity and possibility. There is much that troubles the human spirit.

Yet amid the sadness, there is much for which we can be cheerful, grateful and hopeful. We gather to celebrate 150 years of the Mothers' Union - 150 years of women and men praying, serving, organising, nurturing families, strengthening communities, supporting the Church and bearing witness to the love of Jesus Christ. And for us as Anglicans, we celebrate another remarkable moment: for the first time in the office's more than 1,400-year history, the Archbishop of Canterbury is a woman - the Most Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally, the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury. What a time to be alive!

But anniversaries must do more than evoke nostalgia. An anniversary is not merely an invitation to look back with gratitude. It also invites us to look ahead with courage. We honour those who came before us not merely by repeating their actions, but by asking what faithfulness to Jesus Christ requires of us today.

After 150 years, perhaps the question before Mothers' Union is not simply, 'Where have we come from?' The deeper question is 'Where is God calling us now?'

That brings us to our theme: The Church as an Agent of Justice, From Charity to Transformation. I want us to sit with those words for a moment, as they contain a profound theological claim. The theme does not say that the Church should occasionally perform acts of justice. It portrays the Church as an agent of justice. An agent is one through whom something happens. An agent does not merely observe; an agent participates. An agent acts. An agent becomes an instrument through which change takes place.

Therefore, when we describe the Church as an agent of justice, we mean that God calls the Church to be one of the instruments through which God's justice becomes visible in the world. This is not a new agenda that the church has suddenly discovered. Justice runs like a thread through biblical narrative.

The God we encounter in Exodus hears the cries of enslaved people and comes down to deliver them. The Law repeatedly commands God's people to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The prophets refuse to separate worship from justice. Amos cries, 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Micah asks what the Lord requires: 'To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.' Isaiah challenges religious observance that leaves oppression untouched: 'Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.' When Jesus enters the synagogue at Nazareth, he announces the nature of his mission: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free.'

From Exodus to the prophets, from Mary's Magnificat to Jesus of Nazareth, Scripture reveals a God who hears cries, sees suffering, confronts oppression, restores dignity, and calls God's people to participate in that work.

Justice, therefore, is not an optional ministry of the Church. It is not something we do after evangelism. It is not an appendix to mission. It is not a fashionable response to contemporary social issues. Justice belongs to the character of God and therefore to the mission of God's Church. And biblical justice is deeper than punishment. It is more profound than merely ensuring that everybody receives exactly the same thing.

Justice is about right relationship - right relationship with God, with one another, within our communities, with those who are vulnerable, with power, and with God's creation. Justice asks whether people can live with dignity. Whether the vulnerable are protected. Whether power is accountable. Whether resources are shared justly. Whether strangers are welcomed. Whether those who have been silenced are heard. Whether creation is allowed to flourish. Whether every human being is treated as bearing the image of God.

That is why justice is inseparable from the Gospel. Jesus taught us to pray: 'Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' That is a prayer for transformation. We are asking that what God desires become visible here - in our homes, our churches, our economies, our communities and our relationships; in the lives of women and girls; in how we exercise power; in how we treat strangers; and in how we care for creation.

That brings us to the second movement of our theme: From Charity to Transformation. The word "from" matters. It does not mean we abandon charity. Charity is deeply Christian. We are asking that what God desires become visible here - in our homes, our churches, our economies, our communities and our relationships; in the lives of women and girls; in how we exercise power; in how we treat strangers; and in how we care for creation.

Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, welcomed the stranger, touched those who society deemed untouchable, and restored those who communities had pushed to the margins. The Church must never lose its ministry of compassion. When someone is hungry, we do not lecture them on economics. We feed them. When someone is homeless, we do not start with a seminar on housing policy. We find shelter. When a woman is fleeing violence, we do not start with an academic discussion of patriarchy. We help her find safety.

Compassion responds to the person standing before us, but the Gospel will not allow us to stop there. After feeding the hungry, justice asks: Why are they hungry? After sheltering the homeless, justice asks: Why do some people have several houses while others have nowhere to sleep? After receiving the woman fleeing abuse, justice asks: Why are our homes, communities and societies still so dangerous for women and girls? After assisting the migrant, justice asks what conditions forced this person to leave home, and why has crossing a border rendered their humanity negotiable?

Charity responds to suffering. Justice asks what causes the suffering. Charity binds the wound. Justice asks who or what keeps inflicting the wounds. Charity gives bread. Justice asks why the person who grows the wheat cannot afford the bread.

And transformation asks an even deeper question: What must change so that we do not keep returning tomorrow to bind the same wounds? There, I believe, lies the heart of our theme. Charity asks: What can I give? Justice asks: Why is this happening? Transformation asks: What must change? Discipleship asks: What is God calling us to do about it?

The Church has a long and honourable history of responding to human suffering. Christians have established hospitals and schools, fed hungry communities, cared for orphans, sheltered displaced people, visited prisoners, accompanied the dying, and responded to disasters. Mothers' Union is part of this extraordinary tradition of practical Christianity.

For 150 years, you have entered places of pain that institutions could not reach. You have cared for families, nurtured children, and held families and congregations together through war, migration, poverty, colonialism, apartheid, political upheaval, pandemics, and social change. We honour that extraordinary inheritance.

But Christian mission must also have the courage to examine itself, because it is possible to relieve suffering without confronting its causes. It is possible to feed people without questioning the economic structures that keep them in poverty. It is possible to educate women without challenging the systems that prevent them from exercising leadership. It is possible to shelter survivors of violence without confronting the beliefs and behaviours that enable that violence. It is possible to preach reconciliation without confronting injustice.

And particularly here in Africa, we must acknowledge a painful truth: while the Church has often shown extraordinary compassion towards people living under unjust systems, it has not always shown the same courage in confronting those systems. We sometimes comforted those who were suffering while remaining too comfortable with the very structures that caused their suffering.

That history should make us humble, but it should also make us courageous, because complicity and silence are not the whole Christian story.

There is another story within our tradition - a prophetic tradition of women and men who understood that faithfulness to Jesus Christ required more than caring for the wounded. It also required the courage to ask why people were being wounded, what was causing those wounds, and what needed to change.

Within that prophetic tradition, the Church must reclaim its vocation as an agent of justice. Sometimes faithfulness to Jesus Christ requires holy disturbance. The prophets disturbed kings. Mary sang of the powerful being brought down and the lowly being lifted. John the Baptist confronted wrongdoing. Jesus overturned tables. The early Church proclaimed that its highest allegiance was to Christ rather than to Caesar.

Our faith was never meant merely to make injustice more comfortable. The Gospel announces that another world is possible because another Kingdom has already broken into this one.

And this is where African women theologians speak powerfully to our theme. For decades, African women theologians have posed questions to the Church that we can no longer afford to overlook. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and generations of African women theologians have insisted that theology must listen seriously to African women's lived experiences.

Theology does not happen only in seminaries, universities, synods and pulpits. Theology also happens in kitchens and marketplaces, beside hospital beds and gravesides, in villages and townships, around cooking fires, in prayer groups, and, yes, in Mothers' Union meetings. Women's everyday lives are not footnotes to theology. They are where theology happens.

Because the question of justice sounds different when asked by the woman carrying a bucket of water on her head. The widow denied her inheritance. The girl whose education has been interrupted. The woman working land she does not own. The grandmother raising grandchildren on a pension. The mother trying to feed her children in an economy that excludes her. The migrant woman crossing borders. The survivor of violence sitting silently in a church pew. The woman who faithfully serves the Church while decisions affecting her life and ministry are made in rooms where women are not present. These experiences push theology beyond: 'How can we help her?' They invite us to ask: 'Why is she in this situation?' And then: 'What must change for her to flourish?'

But African women's theology takes us a step further: 'Why are we asking questions about her without first listening to her?' That question changes everything.

Because women are not merely recipients of the Church's compassion. Women possess agency. Women are theologians. Women interpret Scripture. Women possess wisdom. Women organise. Women lead. Women resist injustice. Women imagine alternatives. Women participate in God's transformation of the world.

Isabel Apawo Phiri reminds us that gender, culture, religion, economics and power are interconnected. Injustice rarely travels alone. Poverty has a gendered face. Climate change has a gendered impact. Migration has a gendered dimension.

Violence has a gendered reality. Access to land, education, healthcare, technology, employment and participation in decision-making is shaped by power dynamics.

Justice, therefore, requires us to see the whole person, and this also requires us to examine culture. Musimbi Kanyoro's work on cultural hermeneutics calls us to engage critically with culture - cherishing what gives life and challenging what diminishes it.

Culture carries profound gifts: community, belonging, hospitality, respect for elders, and a deep sense of spirituality. At its core is the wisdom of Ubuntu - *Motho ke motho ka batho*: I am because we are. Ubuntu reminds us that our humanity is bound together.

My flourishing cannot be separated from yours. If that is true, then invoking Ubuntu while women live in fear is deeply contradictory.

There is no Ubuntu when a woman is unsafe in her own home. There is no Ubuntu when a girl is denied an opportunity because she is a girl. There is no Ubuntu when a widow is dispossessed of her home. There is no Ubuntu when migrants and refugees are treated as though crossing a border diminishes their humanity. There is no Ubuntu when poverty condemns generation after generation to the margins. There is no Ubuntu until the earth is exploited to the point that the poorest can no longer live from it. And there is no Ubuntu when women carry the Church yet remain absent from the tables where the Church's future is decided.

If I am because we are, then none of us can truly flourish while others are deliberately kept from flourishing. And here, Ubuntu encounters the Gospel.

Jesus says: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' Not abundant life for some. Not dignity for some. Not safety for some. Not opportunity for some. Not voice for some. But the fullness of life bears witness to God's generous reign. And perhaps this gives us a simple way to hold our theme together. Charity says: 'We will serve.' Justice says: 'We will ask why.' Transformation says: 'Together, we will change what must be changed.' Discipleship says: 'We will do this because we follow Jesus Christ.' That is our anchor.

And now the question comes directly to the Mothers' Union: After 150 years of extraordinary prayer and service, what might God be asking of this movement? We honour an extraordinary inheritance. But perhaps the question for the next 150 years is whether the women who have carried the Church can also help transform it.

Mothers' Union cannot simply be the organisation called upon when the Church needs catering. We cannot reduce generations of wisdom, spirituality, leadership and theological insight to the question of who will make the tea. The tea matters!

Anyone who has attended a church meeting knows that the tea is sometimes the only thing keeping the meeting together! But surely, after 150 years: We can make the tea and shape the agenda. We can arrange the flowers and ask who sits at the table. We can raise the money and ask how it is distributed. We can pray for governments and call those who exercise public power to accountability. We can support families and

challenge structures that destroy them. We can care for survivors and confront the conditions that produce violence. We can teach our daughters confidence and teach our sons that masculinity does not require domination.

That is transformation. Nowhere is that transformation more urgent than in confronting gender-based violence and femicide.

Sometimes we remain silent because we want to preserve family unity. But we must ask: Which family are we protecting when one of its members lives in fear? We must be careful that our theology of marriage does not become a prison for women who are abused. We must be careful that our language of submission is not weaponised to protect violence. We must be careful that we do not preach forgiveness without accountability. We must be careful not to demand reconciliation where there is no repentance, no truth, or no safety.

The Church cannot merely bury women killed by violence and then stay silent about the conditions that enabled their deaths. Our pulpits must speak. Our theology must speak. Our pastoral practice must change. Our men and boys must be part of the conversation. Our safeguarding systems must work. Our churches must become places where survivors know: You will be heard. You will be accompanied. Your safety matters. Your life matters to God.

Justice must also enter our communities' economic life. Women make enormous contributions to economies, much of it invisible and unpaid work. So we must discuss land, education, economic opportunity, fair wages, access to finance, technology, entrepreneurship, inheritance and property ownership. Because poverty is not holy, Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor.' He did not say, 'Blessed is the system that keeps them poor.'

We cannot speak about justice without speaking about creation. Climate change is theological. When rainfall patterns shift, women notice. When water sources disappear, women walk further. When crops fail, families go hungry. When disasters strike, the poorest communities have the fewest resources to recover. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable.

And so, my sisters, mothers and brothers, perhaps the next chapter of Mothers' Union must be one of holy disturbance. Not disturbance for its own sake. Not anger without purpose. Not activism detached from prayer. But holy disturbance, rooted in Scripture, nourished by prayer, sustained by the Eucharist, and directed towards the flourishing of God's people.

What might such flourishing look like? A Church where women are safe. A Church where children are protected. A Church where men and boys are formed for relationships of dignity rather than domination. A Church where survivors are accompanied. A Church where women's leadership is no longer considered extraordinary. A Church where culture gives life rather than diminishes it. A Church where Scripture liberates rather than wounds. A Church where migrants and refugees encounter hospitality rather than xenophobia or Afrophobia. A Church where poverty is challenged rather than

romanticised. A Church where creation is cherished. A Church where young women are heard. A Church where those who have traditionally stood at the margins are not merely invited to somebody else's table but are invited to participate in reshaping the table itself.

Mothers' Union has always been a movement of prayer. Please never surrender that inheritance. But prayer must move us. The hands we fold in prayer must eventually be unfolded for service. The knees on which we pray must eventually straighten so that we can stand against injustice.

And the voices with which we say 'Amen' must also learn to say 'Enough.' Enough to violence. Enough to poverty. Enough to racism. Enough to xenophobia. Enough to exploitation. Enough to the silencing of women. Enough to the destruction of God's creation. We pray because we believe God can change the world. And then we rise because we are sometimes part of God's answer to the prayer we have just prayed.

As we celebrate 150 years, I invite the Mothers' Union to imagine the next 150. Our foremothers built a movement of prayer and service. Perhaps this generation is being called to build on that inheritance and to become an even stronger movement of: Prayer. Service. Advocacy. Justice. Transformation. Not abandoning charity. Never.

Continue feeding the hungry - but ask why they are hungry.
Continue sheltering survivors - but confront the systems that produce violence.
Continue educating girls - but dismantle the barriers that keep them from leading.
Continue caring for creation - but challenge the practices that destroy the Earth.
Continue to welcome migrants - but confront xenophobia and Afrophobia.
Continue praying for justice - but rise from your knees, prepared to help make justice visible.

That is the journey before us.
From charity to justice.
From justice to transformation.
From helping women to hearing them.
From speaking for women to creating space for them to speak.
From inviting women to the table to recognising their authority to reshape it.
From comforting those wounded by injustice to confronting what keeps them wounded.

This is the Church as an agent of justice. This is the Church I pray the next generation will inherit. A Church courageous enough to examine itself. A Church humble enough to repent. A Church prophetic enough to speak. A Church compassionate enough to serve. A Church courageous enough to disturb what needs to be disturbed. A Church where women and girls are safe. A Church where men and boys are formed for relationships of dignity rather than domination. A Church where culture gives life rather than diminishes it. A Church where migrants and strangers encounter hospitality. A Church where creation is cherished. A Church where the poor are not merely given bread but are also participants in shaping the conditions of their own flourishing.

A Church where women's leadership is not treated as an exception but is received as part of the whole Body of Christ's giftedness.

And a Church in which every girl can look towards the altar, the pulpit, the university, the boardroom, the marketplace and the world and know that: There is room for me there. My voice matters. My dignity matters. My gifts matter. My leadership matters. I bear God's image.

After 150 years, the question is no longer: What have we inherited? It is: What will we leave behind? What kind of Church will our daughters inherit? What kind of communities will our granddaughters inhabit? What kind of earth will generations yet unborn receive from our hands? And what will history say we did when the cries of women, children, the poor, the displaced, and creation itself reached our ears?

May it be said: They did not look away. They prayed. They served. They listened. They spoke. They challenged. They acted. They disturbed what needed disturbing. They transformed what needed transforming.

And they understood that prayer was never an escape from the world but the place from which they drew courage to change it. Let us continue to be charitable, but let us not stop at charity. Let us move from relief to restoration. From service to agency. From compassion to justice. From charity to transformation.

The Church is not called merely to make an unjust world more bearable. We are called to bear witness to another possibility - the Kingdom of God. And perhaps that is what it means, after 150 years, to light the way for generations to come.

Not merely to leave them with the memory of what Mothers' Union once was, but to leave them a Church and a world transformed by what Mothers' Union had the courage to become. May we be that generation. May we be that Mothers' Union. May we be that Church.

I thank you.