A History of the MOTHERS' UNION

Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation, 1876–2008

Cordelia Moyse

Foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury
and Jane Williams

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Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation, 1876–2008

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The Mothers' Union is one of the most distinctive aspects of the Anglican 'brand' throughout the world; it has even been described – not quite in jest – as the fifth Instrument of Communion for the Anglican family (along with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates' Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council). Yet for many people outside the Church and probably quite a few within it, the Mothers' Union is part of a cluster of stereotypes, along with pale young curates and angelic but unruly choristers, reflecting a quaint but long-outdated model of church life. It would be dangerously easy to think that it must be associated with unchallenged certainties about the expected models of family life and so with complacently unrealistic approaches to the problems of the contemporary world.

This excellent and exhaustively researched history disposes of any such misconception. From the beginning, the MU has opened up new territory for the ministry of lay women in the Anglican Communion; indeed, it is the most influential and widespread lay movement in the churches of the Communion, and probably among the most active lay groups in any Christian denomination. The vision of its first founders in England may now look a little tame to the casual observer; but Dr Moyse shows very clearly how the challenge to women to play a more active role in fostering the Christian integrity of both the home and the local congregation was anything but routine or conventional at the time. More and more, the MU became a major contributor to the education of women in the UK about Christian identity and Christian ethics and, at least as significantly, about the enormous diversity of the worldwide Church. In recent decades, it has had a crucial role in countless local parishes in Britain as the channel by which first-hand news of communities abroad under great pressure is brought to people in the pews. It has done an extraordinary job in keeping the congregations of the Church of England conscious of their international links and responsibilities. And, as this book chronicles very fully, it has wrestled honestly and sometimes painfully with how it should respond both faithfully and realistically to new and apparently less stable patterns of family life, especially to the growing prevalence of divorce and cohabitation. It has worked hard to offer serious reflection and pastoral support throughout the rapid changes of recent decades.

But that is to speak only of the UK. As the subtitle of this work makes plain, the

MU has been an inseparable part of the expansion of Anglican Christianity into its present global dimensions. And in many contexts far removed from the comfortable parsonages or church halls of popular English fantasy, it is manifestly the most effective deliverer of education in primary health care, post-trauma counselling, micro-finance, education and the general advancement and empowerment of women in societies of the global South. In the ravaged environments of African states that have been through nightmare conflict, the MU offers what often no other group can: the local, effective, liberating building of capacity and mutual support among women. Plentiful inspirational examples exist, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where MU members have supported the recovery of women subjected to sexual violence. They also work with women living with HIV to develop small scale enterprise and to gain confidence, through group solidarity, to challenge stigma and educate local churches and communities about HIV. Given that it is generally recognised that women are central to the development of their communities and societies, this is a monumental contribution to the Millennium Development Goals – and one that is still barely understood or acknowledged by many in the 'development' world, governments and secular NGOs alike.

The worldwide profile of the MU is now one in which the developing world has clear predominance; and one of the difficult questions this study notes is how new energy and a younger membership might be generated within the Church in Britain and Ireland. The history related so admirably by Dr Moyse suggests, however, that it would be very foolish to underrate the capacity of the MU to renew itself and respond in fresh ways to new situations – so long as the Church of England as a whole is capable of understanding what a resource it has here. Whatever the future holds, the need for an international fellowship of Christian witness to the capacities of lay women in serving the Kingdom of God is not going to diminish. The recent history of this organisation prompts a good number of major questions about the whole nature of development and the role of religious activists within it, and that alone makes such a study invaluable. That discussion is long overdue. But above all, this history is an appropriate and appropriately generous celebration of what has proved itself a huge gift to Anglican Christianity throughout the world. The notion that it is an 'Instrument of Communion' is, as we noted, not to be taken lightly: in a fractious and suspicious ecclesiastical environment, it continues to gather people from diverse cultures around the focal imperatives of mission and service. Long may it continue to do so, for the good of Church and world.

Archbishop Rowan and Jane Williams
Pentecost 2009
Lambeth Palace

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this book I have acquired a great many debts and received numerous blessings. This is partly due to the immensity of the subject – millions of women participating in a worldwide organisation which has thrived for over a hundred years – but also to the fact that family life has intervened several times, causing the completion of this project to be postponed. While this book grew out of my doctoral thesis on marriage and divorce reform in England and Wales, 1909–37, it would not have been possible without the early support of Lydia Gladwin, the then head of the Mothers' Union's Action and Outreach Unit and a visionary member of the Worldwide Board of Trustees. No words can express my gratitude to successive boards for entrusting their archives to my care and their history to my voice. I am especially grateful for the intellectual freedom they have granted me while providing generous material support. I have enjoyed the co-operation and enthusiasm of the three most recent Worldwide Presidents, Lady Christine Eames, Trish Heywood and Rosemary Kempsell, as well as the three Central Presidents who preceded them, Rachel Nugee, Hazel Treadgold and Pat Harris. This support has been matched by the staff at Mary Sumner House. It is hard to single out individuals but I must acknowledge the commitment of Angela Sibson, former Central Secretary, under whose watch this book was begun, and Reg Bailey, the current Chief Executive, who has remained steadfast and patient in his support. Kelvin Jordan has probably given more time than any other single person at Mary Sumner House to this project, having carried archival boxes across London and the Home Counties. Sally Orman was an enthusiastic source of both organisational and family history, being distantly related to the Sumner clan.

I have also been the recipient of much help and support from the wider MU. Following the suggestion of the Revd Steven Brookes that active participation in the organisation might inform my research, I became a member and eventually his branch leader. I am very grateful to the members of the Weybridge branch and Guildford Diocese who talked to me about their experiences of the MU and helped me formulate my ideas. My debts to members extend beyond English shores to the wider organisation. Thanks to members in Ghana and South Africa sharing their homes and lives with me, I was given the opportunity to study the history of the MU *in situ*. Members not only offered their insights into the past but provided me with experience of the vibrant life of the contemporary organisation. While it is invidious to mention particular names I am especially grateful to Maureen Simons and Abigail Tukulu in South Africa and Beatrice Amoah and

Christina Gwira in Ghana. My understanding of the Australian MU would also have been impaired without the help of Elizabeth Appleby, Mary Coyne, Jan Livingston and Marilyn Oulds.

I am heavily indebted to the many historians and archivists who have supported this book through their friendship and offering of professional expertise. Among them are Joanna Alberti, Julia Bush, Melanie Barber, Deborah Gaitskell and Pamela Johnston. I am particularly grateful to Andrew Chandler, Brian Dickey and Alan Wilkinson for their reading and comments on particular chapters. I would also like to acknowledge the often unsung work of local historians in Britain and across the world who have collated materials and provided insight into the work of the MU at grassroots level.

One of the joys of this research has been to see a wide range of archives kept in a variety of institutions. Having myself gained some knowledge of the complexities of looking after archival material, I am very grateful for the patient help given to me by staff at the Hampshire Record Office, the Girls' Friendly Society, London Metropolitan Archives, the National Women's Library, and the William Cullen Library at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg. It was a particular pleasure to travel to Whitby to use the archives of the Order of the Holy Paraclete under the care of the now late Sister Hilary.

My most significant relationship, however, has been with Lambeth Palace and its staff. I would like to thank his Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Mrs Jane Williams for their welcome into their household of us as a family. Thanks are especially due to the staff at Lambeth Palace Library under the leadership of Dr Richard Palmer. My relationship with the library began many years ago but has recently deepened following the transfer of the Mothers' Union's archives from Mary Sumner House to its custodianship. I am particularly grateful to Rachel Cosgrove and Rachel Freeman for their interest in the Mothers' Union and their graciousness in working with me to make the history of the MU accessible through its archives and this book.

I would like to thank the staff at Boydell & Brewer, especially my editor Michael Middeke for his skills and support in making this book a reality despite the added hassle of a transatlantic finish line.

No woman can live on intellectual bread alone, and so deep thanks go to friends who have supported me in this work. A special thanks is owed to Richard and Rebecca Hawkins who became the nearest thing to patrons with their magnificent and life-transforming gift of two months' solitude near the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I am also extremely grateful for the fellowship and support of the George Bell Institute.

As befits a book about marriage and family life I must end with domestic thanksgivings, for my parents, Pauline and Andrew Moyse, and my wider family for their endurance, encouragement, babysitting, bed and board. No list of thanks would be complete without mentioning the person who has brought the greatest joy into my life during the course of writing this book, my daughter Theodora. She has helpfully reminded this historian of the urgency of now, of the value of

deeds over words; and the everyday challenge of motherhood. The person, however, to whom this book is dedicated is my husband David Peck, whose enthusiasm maintained my vision for this book in difficult times and who gave unstinting service as reader, critic and partner. I am sure that Mary Sumner (who also owed so much to George) would think that this was only right and proper!

ABBREVIATIONS

AC	*MU Annual Conference Report*
ACC	MU Australian Commonwealth Council
ACSA	Anglican Church of Southern Africa
AMU	Accra Mothers' Union Diocesan Archives, Accra Mothers' Union Diocesan Office
AOHP	Order of the Holy Paraclete Archives, Sneaton Castle, Whitby
AR	*MU Annual Review*
AWF	Anglican Women's Fellowship
BCP	Book of Common Prayer
CC	Central Council
CCMU	Cape Coast Mothers' Union Diocesan Archives, Cape Coast Mothers' Union Diocesan Office
CMS	Church Mission Society
CSI	Church of South India
CPSA	Church of the Province of South/Southern Africa
CT	*Church Times*
EX	Executive Committee
FOM	Fellowship of Marriage
GFS	Girls' Friendly Society
HCR	*Mothers' Union Handbook and Central Report*
IMPC	Invalid/Indoor Members' Prayer Circle
MIC	*Mothers in Council*
MSH	Mary Sumner House
MU	Mothers' Union
MU/	Central MU archival material held at Lambeth Palace Library, London
MUACSAA	Mothers' Union Anglican Church of Southern Africa Archives, Johannesburg
MUJ	*Mothers' Union Journal*
MUN	*Mothers' Union News*
NCW	National Council of Women
ND	*New Dimensions, the Bishop of Willesden's Commission on the Objects and Policies of the Mothers' Union* (1972)
OH	*Mothers' Union Official Handbook*
OHP	Order of the Holy Paraclete
SMU	Scottish Mothers' Union

SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
WCLUW	William Cullen Library, University of Witwatersrand
WDCM	Winchester Diocesan Council Minutes, Hampshire Record Office
WP	*Workers' Paper*
YWF	Young Wives' Fellowship

INTRODUCTION

History books tend to be written for one of two reasons. The author is seeking either to correct what was wrong in a previous teller's tale, or to tell a new tale, which will cast new light on historical developments and open up new fields of enquiry. This book on the Mothers' Union falls largely into the second category. The audience for which it is written is primarily that of historians of women, the Church and the British Empire.

It is an unlikely story that begins in 1876 in a vicarage drawing-room in rural England with a nervous rector's wife hoping to start a new women's group in her local parish. It ends, as far as this account is concerned, 130 years later in 2008 with a still-growing organisation of 3.6 million women in 78 countries. It is a story that, scandalously, has been ignored by the very historians whose interest and expertise one would have thought could only lead them to study the largest female religious organisation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Britain and her territories.[1] An organisation whose very growth, especially in its early years, could 'hardly be paralleled outside the pages of the Acts of the Apostles'[2] and which in its heyday in the British Isles on the eve of the second world war, boasted over 500,000 members.[3] Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century when most mass voluntary membership organisations have disappeared as the underpinning of UK civil society, the MU has over 100,000 members. Furthermore it is more active than ever in national political life as well as in community service in Britain. Internationally it is present in non-governmental organisation fora such as the UN's Economic and Social Council's Commission on the Status of Women. Its name still resonates in popular culture even if it is associated with an image of 1950s Britain, and its purpose confused with the secular Women's

1 While this is undoubtedly true in the UK, the MU has been on the radar of historians in Australia and South Africa for some time. See for example: Deborah Gaitskell, 'Devout Domesticity? A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa', in Cherryl Walker, ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990), pp. 251–72; Deborah Gaitskell, 'Power in Prayer and Service: Women's Christian Organisations', in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, eds, *Christianity in South Africa: a Political, Social and Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 253–67; Patricia Grimshaw, 'In Pursuit of True Anglican Womanhood in Victoria, 1880–1914', *Women's History Review*, 2/3 (1993), 331–47; Anne O'Brien, 'Militant Mothers: Faith, Power and Identity in the Mothers' Union in Sydney, 1896–1950', *Women's History Review*, 9/1 (2000), 35–53.

2 *New Dimensions, the Report of the Bishop of Willesden's Commission on the Objects and Policies of the Mothers' Union* (London, 1972), para. 54.

3 Figures given in the *1939 Official Handbook* were: England, Wales and Ireland 535,315; Scottish MU 7,276; and overseas 79,748.

Institute, from which it could not be more distinct as a faith-based organisation with a membership largely drawn from Africa and Asia. The Mothers' Union, through its banners hanging in virtually every parish church and cathedral in the country, is literally woven into the fabric of national and church life.

While the primary audience for this book is the professional historian, and this largely dictates the treatment of the subject, the author wishes also to serve another audience, the members who already think they know the story but whose understanding of its significance is deficient in various ways. Mothers' Union members have not been well served by literary portraits of the founder, Mary Sumner, or by the few brief institutional histories produced by the organisation.[4] Usually written for commemorative purposes and lacking historical context, rigour and objectivity, they offer an uncritical, often defensive, justification of past events. Violet Lancaster in *A Short History of the Mothers' Union* (1958) made her intentions explicit, writing that her book was for officials and those interested in knowing about the MU and 'also for those who, through ignorance of its constitution and a misunderstanding of its aims and objects, may question its standpoint and criticise its actions'.[5] In 1976 Olive Parker, in a history written to celebrate the centenary of the MU, allowed herself to be critical of the organisation but only with the positive understanding that it was 'an organisation which refused to become fossilised [and] continues to think of the future rather than the past'.[6] If this approach was not handicap enough, enlightenment has been delayed by the fact that the official archives have remained uncatalogued and inaccessible throughout most of their existence. I would hope by drawing on the remarkable unutilised archival sources, as well as situating the Mothers' Union in a wider ecclesial and social context, to give the current 3.6 million members access to a more rounded tale of how their foremothers created an extraordinary worldwide organisation to support the things that matter most to them: marriage, family life and faith.

In serving two different audiences the book explores the identity and nature of the organisation as a way of understanding not only the impact of tremendous social, religious and political changes on the largest worldwide group of ordinary Christian laywomen, but also – crucially – their participation in these changes. It is in fact that dreaded thing, an institutional history, but one that seeks to avoid the sins of being dutiful and inward-looking by situating the subject in current

4 Lady Horatia Erskine, 'History of the Mothers' Union 1876–1919', MU/MSS/001/18d. All references beginning MU/ (consisting of minutes of committees, correspondence and papers) refer to material which is part of the MU Central Archives now held at Lambeth Palace Library, London. Mrs Horace Porter, *Mary Sumner: Her Life and Work* (Winchester, 1921); Violet B. Lancaster, *A Short History of the Mothers' Union* (London, 1958); Joyce Coombs, *George and Mary Sumner: Their Life and Times* (London, 1965); Olive Parker, *For the Family's Sake: a History of the Mothers' Union 1876–1976* (London, 1975); Florence Hill, *Mission Unlimited: the Story of the Mothers' Union* (London, 1988).

5 Lancaster, 'Introduction', in *A Short History*.

6 Publicity on book cover of Parker, *For the Family's Sake*.

historiography from a number of appropriate fields.[7] Through its use of primary sources and its interdisciplinary approach it offers new insights into women's lives both as wives and mothers and as political and religious participants in Britain and in other parts of the world over the course of more than a century. Before describing some of the areas to which this study of the Mothers' Union contributes, it is, however, important to understand the nature, limitations and opportunities of the primary sources in which this work is rooted.

Primary sources

This study draws mainly on the central archives of the Mothers' Union which were held at its headquarters, Mary Sumner House, and are now at Lambeth Palace Library in London, and to which I have been granted exclusive access. This archive can claim to be the largest and most complete collection in the world of primary sources for churchwomen active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These archives contain a full run of minute books beginning in the early 1890s when the national organisation came into being, as well as large quantities of official publications and correspondence. In general the MU's historical past has been well preserved, however haphazardly, in no small part due to the fact that the organisation has occupied the same building for over eighty years. The nature and sheer scale of the archival material is undoubtedly a blessing for historians but it also raises issues.

The most obvious one is rooted in the fact that the material was produced by the central organisation for its own purposes. The advantage this brings is that the archives contain the records which have been deemed essential or most useful to the running of the organisation. The disadvantage is that the records have not been preserved with the idea of telling the whole story of the MU. In part this was a conscious decision reflecting ordinary bureaucratic practice. Absences and silence not only relate to the policy of the retention of particular records but are also found in the very documents which have been retained. While the minute books record key decisions and developments, they disappoint as detailed records of debate and opinion. Likewise correspondence offers glimpses into the workings and assumptions of the organisation but also obfuscates issues by its formulaic or incomplete nature. If correspondence needs to be treated with some caution by historians this is even more the case with the MU's voluminous official publications, whether produced for members or the general public. They cover everything from internal management to various spiritual and social concerns. Some absences and silences are caused by administrative practice but others were likely motivated by the desire of every human institution to conceal its embarrassing and difficult moments. While church institutions might

[7] For the case for institutional history, especially of church bodies, see the introduction in Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: the Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948–1998* (Woodbridge, 2006).

consciously act to avoid the judgement of the eyes of posterity they should, more than most, fear the glance of eternity.

By drawing extensively on this rich and previously inaccessible archive, this book offers a study of a movement of women, but one necessarily seen largely from the perspective of the central organisation. The MU is a mass organisation which has its roots deep in local parish life and the lives of ordinary women. Any comprehensive study of the MU requires careful consideration of both its complex international institutional life and its global grassroots membership. No single volume can do both, however, and this work has its focus on the institutional life of the MU precisely so that the local membership can be explored in the light of global understanding. Nevertheless it does offer a new insight into the lives of millions of ordinary women who voluntarily joined the MU. The liturgist Susan White laments in her pioneering book *A History of Women in Christian Worship* that the lack of sources means that very often in trying to understand women's religious life one is 'building bricks without straw'.[8] This book certainly provides some much needed straw for understanding a significant group of women's lives without claiming to supply sufficient to support a whole structure.

Despite limitations, voices other than that of the central organisation with its official and often prescriptive tone are heard in this account. Where possible, perspectives are offered from the periphery in the form of archival material and local histories produced by dioceses in England and in the three case-study countries of Australia, South Africa and Ghana. The English diocesan material has contributed a great deal to an understanding of the origins and early history of the MU. The overseas case studies give new perspectives on the diverse experience and meaning of membership, although it has to be acknowledged that these voices often serve an organisational purpose as well. Gaining insight into the meaning and reality of the MU for rank and file members throughout most of its history is extremely difficult, largely because of the paucity of records and their limited nature. For example, parish magazines usually contain no more than notices and brief reports of meetings. While letters appeared early on in MU magazines they were largely of a standard and uncritical nature until well into the post-war period. The Church press also offers glimpses of the MU, but its male and hierarchical bias and its function as the 'clergy press' mean the MU did not feature according to its numerical weight. Even then the question remains as to how representative are the contributions of any writer in the print media.

The hunt for personal accounts of any members to supplement official or published materials has been unproductive. While finding any personal records of ordinary woman in the street or pew even well into the twentieth century is a cause of rejoicing for historians, there is a surprising lack of personal papers in this history of an organisation created and run by well-educated middle- and

8 Susan J. White, *A History of Women in Christian Worship* (London, 2003), pp. 199; 278–9.

upper-class women. Mary Sumner herself had her papers burnt at her death, allegedly to hide the secret of her son's illegitimate daughter. The correspondence of hers that exists at Mary Sumner House is largely of a routine nature, and while the vehemence of some of her views stands out, the same ideas and phrases are found in her published speeches and writings. There are also fragments of an autobiography covering her early life and one or two speeches written in her own hand. Material relating to other figures is generally thin. Louise Creighton, Peterborough Diocesan President and Central Council member, left a memoir that contains a few mentions of the MU.[9] Few of the leaders have attracted biographies.[10] Although many husbands of the early leadership have had biographies written about them, some by their wives, they make little or no reference to the Mothers' Union.[11]

While it is nearly always easier to find historical evidence of an organisation's declared ideals and ambitions than the rank and file's response, the recent past can be opened up by contemporary discussion and oral histories. As a member, one-time branch leader and member of a diocesan board of trustees, I have been able to draw on my own and others experience. I have also conducted more formal interviews with Australian, Ghanaian and South African members. The oral sources bring their own bias due to my inability to speak local languages, and the interviews were conducted in English, thereby excluding many ordinary members.

Objectives

In bringing a new field of research to those historians working in church, women's and imperial history, there are particular contributions which this study makes.

For Church historians, the single most important contribution of this book is that it locates critically and contextually the largest group of lay women in the modern history of the Anglican Church. The history of the nineteenth century (and I would add the twentieth) has, in the words of Frances Knight, 'been largely written from the centre, from the perspective of events in Oxford and Cambridge, Lambeth and Westminster, the cathedral close and the episcopal palace. It has

9 James Thayne Covert, ed., *Memoir of a Victorian Woman: Reflections of Louise Creighton, 1850–1936* (Bloomingdale, 1994). Joyce Coombs, a London diocesan president and central vice president, wrote a more revealing memoir, *Patchwork: the Memoirs of Joyce Coombs* (privately published, 2000).

10 Among them Sumner herself and Victoria Buxton. See Coombs, *George and Mary Sumner,* and George W. E. Russell, *Victoria Buxton: a Memoir* (London, 1919).

11 Among the wifely biographies are: Louise Creighton, *Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton* (London, 1906); Maud Montgomery, *Bishop Montgomery: a Memoir* (London, 1935); M. E. Sumner, *Memoir of George Henry Sumner, D. D.* (Winchester, 1910). Other biographies are James B. Atlay, *The Life of the Right Reverend Ernest Roland Wilberforce, First Bishop of Newcastle-on-Tyne and Afterward Bishop of Chichester* (London, 1912); Edward S. Woods and Frederick B. Macnutt, *Theodore, Bishop of Winchester, Pastor, Prophet, Pilgrim: a Memoir of Frank Theodore Woods, 1874–1932* (London, 1933) A. McCreary, *Nobody's Fool: the Life of Archbishop Robin Eames* (London, 2004).

tended to dwell on the problems and priorities of the men who were at home in such places.'[12] The history of the Church as the story of the clergy leaves the vital story of the laity untold. That is not to say that there have not been attempts to put the laity back into recent church history in order to understand how faith was commonly experienced or how beliefs were really understood. Yet Knight's observation that 'to a large extent lay people remain the forgotten participants in the Anglican history of the modern period' is especially true for women.[13] A grassroots lay women's organisation like the MU suffers from neglect for two reasons. The first is that because of its ubiquity in parish life it is taken for granted. One of the few appearances the MU makes in academic history is in the two desultory pages Owen Chadwick gave to it in his monumental two-volume account of *The Victorian Church*.[14] This seems generous when compared to Adrian Hastings's *A History of English Christianity 1920–1990*, which he boldly claimed to be a sequel to Chadwick's book. Hastings overlooks entirely the MU's role at time when its size and views gave it obvious significance in a range of ecclesial and social debates.[15] Yet even when from the 1980s church historians began to look at female identity and roles the MU did not attract systematic study. Much of this work was shaped by a teleological assumption which saw ordination as the summit for women in the church. Among such studies were two ground-breaking books: Brian Heeney's *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850–1930* (1988) and Sean Gill's *Women and the Church of England: from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (1994). While Mary Sumner, the founder of the Mothers' Union, entered the calendar of saints and heroes of the faith as a result of liturgical revisions that produced *Common Worship* (2000), in the same year it was still possible to publish in a history of Christianity in the British Isles a chapter entitled 'Looking, learning and leading from the pews' with no mention of generations of MU members.[16]

This book largely considers members' involvement from an institutional perspective, and of course not all Anglican women belonged to the MU. A study of the MU as a mass movement, however, does reveal something of the ordinary laywoman's participation in Anglican Church life. It also helps to redress the general bias in the developing field of women's religious history towards the unconventional and privileged, which is undoubtedly shaped by the problem of so few extant sources.[17] This study demonstrates clearly the relationship between spirituality, defined in the words of David Bebbington 'as the application of the

12 Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge, 1995), p. ix.
13 Ibid. p. 21.
14 Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part 2: 1860–1901, 2nd edn (London, 1997), pp. 192–3.
15 Preface written for 1987 edition, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1990*, 3rd edn (London, 1991), p. ix.
16 Henry Chadwick, ed., *Not Angels, but Anglicans: a History of Christianity in the British Isles* (Norwich, 2000).
17 White, *A History of Women in Christian Worship*, p. 97. For the danger of concentrating on marginal groups to the exclusion of the ordinary, see E. McLaughlin and R. Radford Ruether quoted in Susan Dowell and Linda Hurcombe, *Dispossessed Daughters of Eve: Faith and Feminism* (London, 1981), pp. 47–8.

principles of faith as well as encounter with the divine', and power.[18] The life of prayer and Christian discipleship was the foundation for this organisation devoted to supporting marriage and family life. The MU provided a forum for women's needs as wives and mothers to be spiritually recognised and channelled. Members brought their own experiences and aspirations to the MU, inevitably moulded by class, race and gender assumptions. They had 'their own perspectives and claims on religion' even in a male hierarchical church.[19] Through close examination of sources one sees that female spirituality is not inherently a benign force. While the life of faith and prayer was designed to strengthen women in their Christian vocation, it was also used on occasion to stifle internal debate and dissent.

This study is also an important complement to the institutional history of the Anglican Church to which the MU belonged. MU members seem not to have been merely passive recipients of patriarchal religious authority but creative participants in developments in wider Church life and spirituality. While the MU corporately had little effect on the House of Bishops and Church Assembly, it contributed to and reflected the 'subtle changes in popular taste, values and attitudes' that underpinned liturgical, theological and missiological change.[20] MU publications communicated and extolled many contemporary trends to a wide audience. For example, they promoted and reported members' active participation in the Parish Communion movement in the post-war period, which resulted in holy communion becoming the normal expression of Anglican worship. The MU also contributed to a sense of the Church beyond the parish boundary. In its early days the MU as a diocesan organisation strengthened allegiance to the bishop and diocese, and later sought to unite members in action and prayer around issues of national and global importance whether political, social or missiological in nature. Today the MU is considered part of the bedrock of the Anglican Communion. Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, frequently speaks of the Mothers' Union as an instrument of unity during a period of threatened schism over issues in sexuality.[21]

If Anglican laywomen, and the Mothers' Union in particular, have been neglected by church historians, feminist historians have been slow to recover such women and understand their lives. This study of Mothers' Union is a beneficiary of, and contributor to, four recent trends in women's history: the re-valuing of religion and the questioning of the concepts of 'conservative', 'feminism' and 'separate spheres'.

Linda Wilson's *Constrained by Zeal: Female Spirituality amongst Nonconformists, 1825–75* (Carlisle, 2000) is a welcome example of recent attempts to undercover the mainstream of female spirituality.

18 *Constrained by Zeal*, p. xiv.

19 Quoted in Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 55.

20 White, *A History of Women in Christian Worship,* p. 278.

21 See for example, *Anglican Journal*, 1 January 2006 at www.articlearchives.com/humanities-social-science/religion/894124–1.html. Jane Williams said the same thing when opening the Spouses' Conference at the 2008 Lambeth Conference.

Within women's studies it is easier now than formerly for religion to be understood not in terms of 'false consciousness' and simply a force of oppression but as a source of power and agency. Joan Scott wrote in 1983 of the need for women's history to take on board how politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics, with the result that,

> female agency then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women, but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender which are nonetheless present and defining forces of politics and political life.[22]

While not all historians would agree with Dowell and Hurcombe that religion 'is without doubt the single most important shaper and enforcer of women's image and role in culture and society',[23] it is now recognised as an important channel for gender expectations. The importance of evangelical religion in many women's lives in the nineteenth century is central to Leonora Davidoff's and Catherine Hall's account in *Family Fortunes* of the emergence of a distinct middle-class identity.[24] The first major collection of feminist historians looking at English women's religious history in 1986, in the words of Gail Malmgreen, concentrated 'not on the interior world of belief, but on the public expression of religion and on religion as an engine of social action'.[25] Yet moving beyond this narrow view of the role of religion in women's lives, historians have begun, in the words of the ethnographer Marla Frederick, to realise that 'women's refashioning of their world may not always coincide with traditional interpretations of radical politics; nevertheless the communities they create and the life changes they inspire speak to the agentive possibility of their faith'.[26] The Mothers' Union, with its espousal of the Christian vocation of motherhood, has not only constrained women but has also empowered them throughout its history by giving dignity and status to their domestic lives and often sacrificial choices. It has given members not only opportunities to engage with social issues in the light of their faith but also practical skills such as public speaking and administration, and has acted as a channel in the Global South for women's economic development through literacy and other programmes. It has provided within global civil society a leadership platform for many ordinary women, enabling them to testify and so work to improve the situation of local families, influence national legislation or help to hold the G8 or the United Nations to their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals to end global poverty.

22 Joan Wallach Scott, 'Women in History: the Modern Period', *Past and Present*, 101 (November 1983), 156.
23 Dowell and Hurcombe, *Dispossessed Daughters*, p. 3.
24 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).
25 Gail Malmgreen, ed., *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760–1930* (London, 1986), p. 8.
26 Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 12.

The second trend in women's history to which this study contributes is that of the relationship of conservatism to women's identity and aspirations. Following the successive electoral victories by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher, whose view and vision of society owed little to any concept of feminism, feminist writers and historians have come to see the need to understand rather than dismiss 'conservatism'. Alison Light in her study of femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars writes of the challenge of seeing how conservatism is able 'to alter its shape while remaining recognisably the same animal'.[27] She usefully reminds historians that concepts such as a commitment to family life have not been the sole property of one ideology nor have they always been used to resist change. The Mothers' Union's understanding of divorce and sexuality cannot be simply dismissed as a reflection of conservative political ethos. Its institutional stance on the relationship between sex, reproduction and monogamous marriage evolved, as did its relationship with what were the social norms at any one time. For example, while its membership grew in the interwar period when 'conservatism' was strong this did not mean that its views on social policy were reflected in the legislation of that period. Neither did its self-designation as 'the handmaiden of the Church' reflect a conjunction of opinion or simple subservience to a male hierarchy.

A third development in women's history to which a study of the MU is apposite is the desire to make the term 'feminism' more inclusive. A great deal of theoretical work has been done to find a definition of feminism for all times and places. The aim has been to incorporate not only those who worked for equal rights but also the so-called 'relational feminists' who promoted women's interests based on their differences from men, namely in their roles as wives and mothers. In a seminal article Karen Offen in 1988 argued for an end to seeing feminism as divided into two schools and for the inclusion of those who demanded compensation for housework as well as those who worked for female unions and equal pay.[28] This has been picked up by some historians of the interwar period who wish to overturn the era's 'anti-progressive and reactionary' image.[29] They have found evidence of feminism not just in the small and declining numbers of self-declared feminist organisations but in mass organisations such as the Women's Institute, National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and even the Mothers' Union.[30] According to Catriona Beaumont these groups 'focused on the rights and duties that women had as equal citizens, promoted the unpaid work performed by women in the home and participated in numerous

27 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991), p. 18.
28 Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: a Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs* 14/1 (Autumn 1988) 119–57.
29 Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars 1918–1939* (London, 1989), p. 3.
30 Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: the Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997), p. 6.

campaigns to enhance the social and economic position of women'.[31] While the suggestion that the upholding of women's domestic role is not in itself antipathetic to feminism is stimulating to further thought, this inclusiveness raises problems.

Does not the lack of shared motivation and analysis of gender politics undermine the inclusion of some women's groups into the feminist movement? When the MU did support family allowances it acted from a belief in women's vocation in the home and not from a belief in civic rights. It did not believe women as a sex were oppressed by men. Surely the fact that these groups resisted, and in the case of the MU continue to resist, any association with the feminist label suggests an ideological division? Maggie Andrews however identifies the need for a feminism for those 'who struggle in a variety of areas for improvement in the lives of women or against male domination'. Equating the two criteria, she enlists the National Childbirth Trust, women against pit closures, mother and toddler groups, and Women against Violence against Women into the women's movement, writing that they do not need to share the same views and can even oppose each other. Andrews, echoing E. P. Thompson, wishes to rescue the WI members from the 'condescension of posterity', but in having such a wide definition of feminism she is guilty of creating what might be called 'anonymous feminists', women who belong to a movement towards which they are at best indifferent and at worst hostile.[32] It seems to me that there is a confusion in some current women's history between the history of feminism and the history of women, with too much emphasis on social action rather than its motivation.[33] More disturbing in this desire to widen the definition of feminism is the implicit assumption that only 'feminist' women are worthy of study.

Another development in recent women's history has been the questioning and nuancing of the analytical tool of 'separate spheres' which situated women in the home and excluded them from public life while making them responsible for the transmission of moral values. Until the late 1980s separate sphere ideology, as described by Davidoff and Hall, was largely seen as a confining force in women's lives.[34] Now there is a greater sense of the difference between prescription and reality. Female agency has been recognised, as has the fact that the sexes had differing roles but in overlapping spheres. Rooted in Mary Sumner's evangelicalism and espousal of the domestic role of women, the MU, although beginning

31 Caitriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not Feminists: the Boundary negotiated between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women's Organisations in England, 1928–39', *Women's History Review*, 9/2 (2000), 414.

32 Andrews, *The Acceptable Face,* p. xii.

33 Sharon Sievers, 'Six (or More) Feminists in Search of a Historian', in Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel, eds*, Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History: Essays on Women in the Third World* (Indiana, 1992), pp. 319–30.

34 Linda Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History', *Journal of American History*, 75/1 (1988), 9–39; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', in Robert Shoemaker and Mary Vincent, eds, *Gender and History in Western Europe* (London, 1998), pp. 197–225.

twenty years after the alleged formation of separate spheres, provides evidence that such an ideology did not confine all women to the home. Rather such ideology gave women personal and social agency and power. A study of the MU gives weight to the view that separate spheres was more about types of activity and issues rather than about physically distinct spheres of influence and responsibility. Furthermore, as Robert Shoemaker has observed, historians must be alert to the fact that contemporary understandings of the public and private, and the political and domestic, may not be the same as those they study. It is easy to assume that the MU's definition of public campaigns around divorce and education as moral and religious acts rather than political activism was a tactic rather than a sincerely held belief.[35] And no doubt such statements did head off religious critics of female transgression into the public sphere and put clear blue water between the MU and organisations which demanded women's rights. Yet to see this as the whole explanation is to do a disservice to the MU's Christian credentials, for what was of primary importance to it was the religious vocation of wives and mothers, not social structures and norms. The MU's use of the rhetoric of women's domestic vocation to extend its mission beyond the home was entirely consistent with an organisation which aimed to support women in their God-given vocation and did not see its primary identity as a campaigning force.

The fourth and final field where a study of the MU makes a significant contribution to contemporary historiography is the relationship of women to the Empire and the post-imperial world. As a mass movement the MU was a channel for popular connection with distant parts of the Empire, taking the form of magazine reports of fellow members, letters to and from overseas branches and members, financial support of MU workers and occasional personal visits. The object of these activities was to acknowledge and foster the common bond of Christian vocation between women across the Empire. Not only were women in Africa and Australia fellow members constitutionally, they were also equal subjects and objects of common prayer. The MU was initially a link with the home country for expatriate women in the white dominions and a sign of status and spiritual maturity for indigenous women. The MU serves as an important example of how a group of women bound by the egalitarian ties of a shared faith and purpose lived out their beliefs. While the MU as an organisation was not immune to the realities of British imperial power and notions of white superiority, it also offered the means for breaking down prejudice and of seeing 'the other' as equally precious in God's sight.

The working of the MU across the world shows that it was not possible to impose one model or meaning of the organisation on all women. The different social and ecclesial contexts of the colonies and dominions not only shaped the organisation on the ground but influenced the development of the central organisation, often driving major constitutional reform. The interactive nature of the

[35] Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650–1850: the Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London, 1998), pp. 306–7.

relationship between the metropole and colonies demonstrates that power and influence was not the sole preserve of women leaders in Great Britain. In closely studying the MU in Australia, Ghana and South Africa it is possible to avoid stereotyping the MU's involvement with Empire or the experience and meaning of the organisation to its members. The moulding of the organisation to serve local circumstances and the contesting on occasion of the meaning of membership by indigenous women demonstrates that it was impossible to form and run a monolithic organisation from central London. Yet this study also reveals how an imperial organisation was slow to face the constitutional implications of decolonisation and enculturation. It had to be forced to near breaking point in the 1960s before granting autonomy to members of autonomous churches, a move finally made only in 1974. It then took a further 25 years before the implications of being a worldwide organisation of partners led to significant reform of the central decision-making body of the organisation. Nevertheless the covenant model of unity in diversity offered by the MU is a prophetic one for the Anglican Communion in the twenty-first century and for international institutions coming to terms with globalisation.

Structure

The problem with writing a book on the Mothers' Union is not writing one book but resisting the temptation to write a series. There is no shortage of source archival material relating to many aspects of women's lives in the British Isles and overseas during the past century. The material presented in this study is chosen to illustrate the argument about the overall identity and nature of the organisation at different times rather than to give a comprehensive overview of the MU across its whole range of concerns in every time and in contrasting national contexts. The material is arranged in four chronological periods and in three thematic strands, so specialist readers can concentrate on a particular period or strand of activity with maximum economy and a minimum of overlap.

The first period (1876–1909) covers the MU's origins and early days under the leadership of its founder, Mary Sumner. By the time she stood down as leader it was a mass organisation within the UK and was already established in some corners of the Empire. The second section (1910–1944) deals with what in many ways can be described as the MU's golden era. This was a period when constitutional reform proceeded in the light of phenomenal membership growth combined with an expanding vision of its mission. The third section (1945–1974) covers the difficult years when the MU struggled to maintain what was now widely considered its conservative practice and image before finally embracing major constitutional and ideological reform. The last section (1975–2008) examines the continuing legacy of reform both at home and abroad. This section gives a general survey of the last 30 years rather than detailed analysis. It will take future historians with a longer perspective to move from a survey to a deep analysis of this recent period, for it is fair to say that in comparison to earlier periods of

its history the last three decades have been years of constant revolution for the MU. In seeking to adapt to the reality of being a mass movement in the developing world, as well as servicing its members at home and aboard who were confronted by some tremendous social changes, the MU has been involved in a battery of new policy initiatives and constitutional reforms.

Within each of the first three chronological periods there are three themed chapters (with the exception of the first in which there is one extra chapter). The themes are:

1. Identity and Spirituality: the MU was founded as a fellowship of prayer and so consideration of models and methods of prayer and devotion are fundamentally important to understanding the organisation. These chapters chart the model of female Christian discipleship offered to women and the organisation's understanding of its corporate mission. The construction of the MU's identity is considered in relation to the Anglican Church and the MU's understanding of the role and vocation of women in the Church and wider society. These chapters examine the MU's changing identity and methods as it sought to remain faithful to its core purpose when faced with new challenges and circumstances.

2. Marriage and Family Life: focusing on the organisation's evolving understanding of marriage and the family, these chapters look at how this affected its attitudes to its own membership and mission, and shaped its engagement with wider society. Topics discussed include divorce and birth control; the construction and development of ideals of motherhood and womanhood; the MU's increasing isolation from mainstream Western culture; and its near escape from institutional self-destruction.

3. Membership and Worldwide Work: covers the origins and growth of the MU internationally and its slow evolution from an 'English' society with overseas work to a worldwide organisation where African and Asian women are the clear majority of members. The nature of the relationship between the central organisation and the membership overseas is explored against a background of imperialism, missionary endeavour, decolonisation and globalisation. These changes are illustrated by case studies of the MU in the very different contexts of Australia, Ghana and South Africa.

Whether a rank and file member or a prominent leader of the MU, millions of women around the world have yet to take their place in history. This is due to ecclesiastical and academic blindness as well as to the Mothers' Union's previously inaccessible central archives, which were indicative of the organisation's own lack of understanding of its importance in Church, imperial and women's history – and perhaps, as a lay female movement, reflected its lack of self-esteem in a clerical and largely male-led institution. A member of staff once said to me 'for an organisation which is always looking back to the glory of its past, you would think its archives would be in a better state!' The central archives are now indeed in 'a better state' and housed at Lambeth Palace Library in London, but the history of the organisation does not reside in them alone. There remains a

continuing need to preserve and make accessible the records of branches and dioceses not only within the UK but worldwide.

This book offers a thorough assessment of what to date has been largely unexplored territory: the MU's central archive. From such archival treasure it begins to explore the MU's significance and role in the Church and the lives of millions of its members. As a consequence it makes a vital cross-disciplinary contribution to the work of historians in many fields. This book is simply a flare fired so as to attract others to the vineyard. May the lives and faith of so great a cloud of witnesses continue to be illuminated by this study of their offering of themselves to God, family and country.

Part I

1876–1909