

From Roberta McKelvey, Mothers' Union Trustee, as written for the Church Weekly paper which is circulated throughout Ireland.

## **IRISH VIEWS OF TOOWOOMBA**

**The Mothers' Union held a Special World Wide Regional Meeting in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, in March, 2008. Three members from Ireland give their impressions of the event.**

**Roberta McKelvey writes...**

Each Mothers' Union member has a commitment to pray for each other daily at midday. Year in and year out, 'The Wave of Prayer' is the focus for prayer for members and programmes in the dioceses around the world. The three Irish members who attended the first Special Regional Meeting at Toowoomba in South East Queensland, Australia saw that Wave of Prayer becoming alive as they gathered at the airport in Brisbane. It was a colourful group from seventeen provinces of the Anglican Communion. The meeting was attended by over eighty members from Melanesia, Myanmar, Korea, Sri Lanka, S. India, Papua New Guinea, West Indies, New Zealand, Australia, United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Canterbury and York.

Americans in jeans stood alongside their fellow members from Melanesia and Papua New Guinea wearing their beautiful blue and white Mothers' Union dresses. All were united by their membership of Mothers' Union, their commitment to the work of the society and its Christian Concern for Families Worldwide.

During the week stories unfolded of women who walked miles to meetings, of bans on new church buildings, of restrictions on publicity about the work of the Mothers' Union, of limits on women being involved in politics, of poverty and lack of medical facilities. We marvelled at their spirit and determination.

Despite some problems of language it soon became obvious that Mothers' Union members worldwide share a spirituality and desire to help others. We were privileged to join in worship, in bible study and discussions, using many languages. We shared our experiences.

Toowoomba was the pilot for five more consultations and as such it fulfilled its aim to provide opportunities for Mothers' Union Leaders worldwide to meet together to practice and explore the spirituality of the organisation, to share experiences, celebrate diversity of cultures, build relationships, identify goals, and to plan for the future.

These meetings of Provincial Presidents, Diocesan Presidents and MU Workers will replace the large Worldwide Councils which were held every ten years just prior to the Lambeth Conference. Although changes were first considered in response to the limited funding available, it has become obvious that smaller groups meeting in this way, provide a better learning and sharing opportunity. Friendships based on a common aim and belief were formed and will be maintained by prayer and e-mail!

Plans are now well underway for the second Regional Meeting which will be held in Kampala, Uganda in October. Taking part will be two Presidents from Ireland, Roberta Rodgers and Ruth Mercer and three Irish members of the Central Trustee Board - Margaret Crawford, Patsy Devoy and Roberta McKelvey.

### **Margaret Shultz writes...**

A young teenager appeared in court in Brisbane for the first time for a minor offence but was terrified that he would be sent to prison; his parents had refused to go with him to the hearing to "teach him a lesson" but in the waiting area he met a lady who listened to his story, gave him some coffee and cake and, when the time came, accompanied him into the court room so that he would know that he was not alone.

A lady in Melanesia who had received a canoe to help her with her work visiting different islands and teaching the women there how to care for their families both spiritually and physically and who mentioned ever so gently that she was delighted with the canoe but it would have been such a help if there had been enough money to send her an outboard motor as well!

A young boy in Ireland whose unemployed father could not afford to send him with his friends to a Christian summer camp received the necessary financial help through a special holiday fund.

What is the connection in these stories? The answer is simple - Mothers' Union. The volunteer in Brisbane manning the coffee stall at the courthouse, the worker paddling her canoe in Melanesia and the Away From It All Holiday Fund which operates in the UK and Ireland are all Mothers' Union initiatives and these were some of many stories I heard when attending the Mothers' Union Special World Wide Regional Meeting near to Brisbane early last March.

Geraldine Beattie, Diocesan President of Clogher Diocese, and I were privileged to be selected to represent Ireland at the Meeting, along with eight others from the four Anglican provinces in the UK.

Presentations gave insights into the work done in different units of MU - we heard about experiences in lobbying governments, about reaching out to the community and advice on how to "sell" MU. These were interspersed with discussion groups to provide feedback, and were just some of the items in the information filled programme.

These presentations, by Trustees and members of staff from Mary Sumner House in London were excellent. The Bible studies and worship times were inspirational and very special in such a beautiful setting. For me, however, the most exciting and memorable element of the whole event was the opportunity to meet and talk with women from so many diverse places and to discover how they are seeking to fulfil the vision of our Founder Mary Sumner to "win the hearts of the nations for Christ". It has been an unforgettable opportunity and experience for which I am deeply grateful.

### **Geraldine Beattie writes...**

When I heard that I had been chosen to represent Ireland at the 2008 World Wide Conference in Australia many emotions rose to the surface, excitement at being chosen but very aware that Australia was many miles away and raising awareness for the journey would need to be organised.

However what seemed ages away very quickly crept round and on the 28th February 2008 I found myself on a flight bound for Brisbane and the sunshine of an Australian Summer/Autumn.

After spending a day resting in Brisbane and making contact with other Diocesan Presidents I boarded the coach along with many other members from around the world and began a week packed with fellowship, getting to know new people and most importantly learning more about Mothers' Union throughout the world.

Upon arrival in Toowoomba we went to St Luke's Church for a service of Holy Communion. Later we adjourned to the hall for supper and it was here that I experienced the first of many spontaneous bursts of singing from Mothers' Union friends from Melanesia. Their love of God shone through their singing and it was fantastic to witness a sea of blue Mothers' Union uniforms swaying and clapping as they praised God.

The next morning found us up early to blue skies and sunshine eager to begin the conference in earnest. Everyone was divided into groups named after Australian animals, birds or trees. I was in the gum tree group and over the week we really bonded with each other and found out a lot about each others cultures and more importantly how Mothers' Union is developing in their country. We shared joys of how Mothers' Union work is helping and listened to problems of paddling canoes up long rivers and how governments can hinder work.

Each day a group was responsible for leading prayers and during the day we had short spotlights on particular countries that set up display boards with pictures and gave a short talk on their country and the work going on there. Throughout the meeting small gifts were exchanged with each other. These gifts highlighted traditions from each of our countries and were very useful upon returning home to use as illustrations when asked to talk to branches and other meetings.

The meetings ended with a very moving service marking the Women's Worldwide Day of Prayer. This was led by the members from Guyana as the service for use around the world had been prepared by the ladies of Guyana. The doors of the church were wide open, sunshine streamed in and there was a real sense of God's presence as women from over the world met together to worship, and to pray for each other and the work of Mothers' Union as we departed to our own countries.

During the week there were many highlights but for me but here are just a few that really have stood out in my mind

- The singing and freedom of worship by the ladies from Melanesia
- Sharing experiences, cultures, laughter and prayer with ladies I might never have an opportunity to meet again.
- To really know that even though I was passing over high mountains, deep seas and green valleys nothing could surpass the enormity of knowing the abundance of God's love not only for me but for mankind everywhere.