

The MU on the Road to the Holy Hectare

Rosemary Bolton and Ann Stephens-Jones

On the 14th August the Mothers' Union had an outing to the "Holy Hectare" in Westminster. After doing our power walk from Victoria and waving at Westminster Cathedral, we arrived at St Matthew's Church Westminster, where we were treated to a personal tour of the Church. St Matthew's is in the "Anglo Catholic" tradition and was originally built as a Victorian Mission Church in the notorious "Devil's Acre", an area rife with vice and gin palaces. We didn't find any gin palaces but we did enjoy a sumptuous cream tea/lunch in a delightful flowery courtyard, a real oasis of calm and spirituality in the heart of Westminster. Unfortunately the Church suffered serious damage from 2 fires in 1977 and in the 1980s but the restoration work is a triumph and the gilded reredos in the main Church is a sight to behold. The Lady Chapel upstairs is much smaller and has a medieval feel to it; the colours are bright and cheerful even after its restoration 25 years ago. The Church now has a conference centre which can be hired out and is justifiably popular.



After lunch we arrived at Mary Sumner House for one of the annual open day tours that the Mothers' Union runs in August to celebrate the

birthday of Mary Sumner, our founder. The building was built and consecrated in 1926 and is large, impressive and very beautiful with many pictures, chandeliers and stained glass. It has 6 floors although, due to the economic climate, some of the rooms are now let out to other organisations and rented out for conferences and meetings. There is a memorial chapel on the ground floor where midday prayers are held every day and we were able to take part in the prayers (in rotation) for MU branches and dioceses across the world. This was a very moving experience. The Mothers' Union has branches in 83 countries with 4 million members worldwide, so there is always someone to pray for!

Our tour of the house included talks from the different units: Faith and Policy, Action and Outreach, MU Enterprises, Fundraising and Communications and Finance and Central

Services. Around 45 people are employed at Mary Sumner House & we all found it very humbling to be reminded how much extraordinary work is being done worldwide by them helped by many "ordinary" members and supporters; everyone plays their part and contributes what they can. We were also given time to visit the well-stocked shop, which is very popular with surrounding office workers for its delightful range of cards & gifts. We left with a greater understanding of the breadth of the work undertaken in the MU's name & memories of a very special bond binding together those working in MSH & members like ourselves throughout the world.

After our fascinating visit to MSH we carried on our ecclesiastical pilgrimage to Church House, the administrative headquarters of The Church of England. We were honoured to have a private tour to view the main conference and Synod rooms, not normally open to the public (but then as MU members we don't consider ourselves to be "public"!). We enjoyed seeing the elegant rooms and had a "balcony appearance" overlooking the central Green with great views of Westminster Abbey, Westminster School and the Houses of Parliament; we did feel grand! We saw the rooms where the Houses of Commons and Lords sat occasionally during World War II when there was either damage or risk of danger at the Houses of Parliament and were shown the Archbishops of Canterbury and York's rooms. The Chapel with the altar upheld by golden angels was most impressive. However the pièce de résistance was visiting the main circular Synod Chamber, which is huge and magnificent, with a high domed glass roof, gold lettering around the dome, a spectators' gallery and doors for the bishops, clergy and laity to go through to vote aye or nay (nowadays it's all done by digital handheld controllers).

The whole day was such a triumph, we felt we had to stop and reflect on it with a drink and a cake on the way home (it had been a long time since our last piece of cake!) We also needed to stop for another photo opportunity at Westminster Cathedral. We had such an enjoyable day, filled with interesting talks, spiritual moments for reflection, food, fun, friendship, chatter and laughter! You really ought to come too next time we have an outing!!