Shirley Girt

I am Shirley Girt. I was born in 1937

I have been a member of Mothers’ Union since, about 1990 I suppose. I was leader for 13 years. It’s enrolling new members, branch meetings include an act of worship, inviting speakers along and looking after your membership, making sure that if they are sick, somebody knows about it and visits. We send birthday cards so that everybody, even if they have no family, they are at least going to have a birthday card from us. Looking after each other basically. Mothers’ Union is a Christian society. It is founded within the church and its objects are looking after families, particularly, supporting people in marriage, and prayer. Prayer is behind everything that we do.

*How have you noticed the membership differ over the years, and the needs changing,?*

We are very much an ageing population now. Young mothers have other things they do. We now enroll men and we also accept people who are single, people who have never been married. We accept divorcees. We are as broad as we can be, and that certainly has changed over the years, it was very much for mothers and children when it was first opened up.

*What did it mean to you?*

It made my Christian faith more meaningful because I could become involved more in doing things that I hadn’t probably taken the opportunity to do before. Mothers’ Union helped me to realise that I could be part of something and help other people. I think that was probably one of the big stepping stones for me.

*What did Mothers’ Union achieve at St Margaret’s?*

When I took over as the branch leader I tried to build on the things that were already happening. Like the emergency toiletry bags which we still do for the hospital - I reorganized the way it’s done. About four times a year I do somewhere between 25/30 bags and so we’re taking just over 100 a bags a year up to the hospital. They’re very pleased when I take them in. It’s also nice because the whole branch is contributing to something that could be very essential for somebody arriving in hospital with nothing after a road accident or something like that.

*Are you involved with a food bank?*

Yes, that started mainly because one of the ladies in our church, who organised the FIND Families In Need Group in Ipswich, she came to speak to the Mothers’ Union branch and I don’t think many of us really knew very much about it at that time. Following her talk we were obviously more aware and then the next Mothering Sunday I asked her what we as a Mothers’ Union branch could do, was there anything in particular that she was in need of? At that time she was just running Families In Need and she said, oh yes, we could do with washing materials, soap powders, detergents of various sorts. So I organised the branch. I put half a dozen laundry baskets at the back of the church a week or two before Mothering Sunday and my dear ladies came along with all their bits and bobs and we filled these baskets up. And we presented them as our offering during the Mothering Sunday service. We also have a bin at the back of the church for food stuffs. People will come in with their bags of rice and things. So it has extended beyond Mothers’ Union. A lot of people within the church will help keep the Food Bank going.

*And you knit hats for the Seafarers’ Mission?*

We don’t do quite as many as we used to, because unfortunately we’ve lost several members who were knitters. So at the moment I think I’ve probably only got three maybe four regular knitters. Some it perhaps takes them, dare I say it, months to knit a hat because not all are natural knitters. But bless them, they still keep trying. I suppose we had been doing 100 a year. It’s gone down a bit now. I’ve got a bag waiting to go, and we’ve probably done about 50 so far this year I think.

*How would you describe your membership in Mothers’ Union today?*

We are elderly. I think our youngest is 61. Our oldest is 100. We did have one lady who was 105, and we are sort of spread across the range in between. We have a complete range of people. Some who were housewives, mothers, some who had part time jobs. We have got, I think it is, five ex teachers. Several people had fantastic experiences during the war and have shared these with us on occasions.

*What did you find challenging and rewarding when you were a leader?*

It was a challenge but I gained so much from it. I gained confidence. I never thought I could stand up and talk in front of people but I learned how. It’s certainly changed my life quite considerably, at a time when I really needed something as well. I think it was just good timing.

I think all the speakers we’ve had have brought something very special. We tend to try and have speakers that, not necessarily have a religious message, but have a caring message.

But one speaker who impressed me more than any…in fact she brought me to tears.

She was the wife of the vicar on the Isles of Scilly and when they retired they came to Suffolk, and she writes the most beautiful poetry. She read her poems and it was going through the Christian year, and it was so moving. She was able to put into her poetry the things that some of us thought and felt but couldn’t express. That made a very big impression on me.

I think other speakers have made us realise how much other people put into their lives. It makes you feel very humble sometimes. Like the bobby on the beat who just looks as if he’s enjoying his walk, but behind the scenes so much is going on in their lives, and not just their lives, their families’ lives. We as Mothers’ Union need to support those people particularly.

I think the church as a whole is grateful when we can do things and carry them through. Like with the kneelers, you know you want a group of people to work together and we are already there. The Mothers’ Union did do the kneelers.

*Let’s go on to the kneelers. They each represented different elements of the church?*

I was involved when they brought the altar rail forward and we made sixteen kneelers and that wasn’t specifically Mothers’ Union, it was just members of the church who were prepared to buy and take on a kneeler. And that was a year or so after we lost our son, so my kneeler was in memory of my son. We all had the same design, but we all did them for different reasons.

It’s a tapestry canvas and then with wool you build up the design. The canvas is stamped with the colours, so the pattern is already on the canvas. Because it was for the altar rail, bunches of grapes were used..They are what I call traditional designs for kneelers.

*What did the church mean to you in your son’s death?*

The church was marvellous. The day of his funeral, when we walked into church, it was just as if somebody wrapped a warm blanket around us.

He died on the Thursday night after ringing practice. He had a flat of his own. We’d taken him home, and he was getting ready for bed and he had a massive brain hemorrhage and literally dropped dead on the floor, just like that.

*And the church has a memorial garden?*

I don’t know who established the rosebed in the first place. When I became branch leader, we had recently lost a member and they had talked about putting a rose in the rose bed for her, but the roses in there were old.

Now I like beds to be one colour so we dug out all the old roses. I phoned David Austin roses and said I wanted to plant some roses in a memorial rose bed. He recommended this rose called Molyneux which is a golden yellow. We planted this all up and, sadly as we’ve lost members, we’ve put a new rose in.

Mind you I have saved one place because there is one dear lady in the Mothers’ Union. She lives in a house with just a courtyard garden and she loves gardening. So she comes in and she deadheads the roses in the summer for us. So I’ve promised her I’ve saved a place for her rose. She’s in her late 80s now. Whenever the time comes I said I promise you, Mary, I’ll put a rose in for you!

*You’ve had other jobs that you’ve taken on at the church?*

John and I cleaned the church for 20 years. I gave up when I was 70. I thought that was long enough! We also do the south side of the church garden. There is a flower bed along the side. John and I together keep that planted up and tidy. That’s in addition to the rose bed.

*Back to Mothers’ Union- is there anything else you would like to say?*

But a lot of parenting and charity work is done by Mothers’ Union particularly overseas. In some of the African countries, some of the villages wouldn’t get by without Mothers’ Union, they provide medical skills, they run orphanages and things like that. We have a collection every year. It’s called Wheels and it’s just raising money to pay for bicycles for Mothers’ Union to get from one village to another. Just to help out.

*Is there anything else you’d like to say?*

I hope Mothers’ Union goes on. I think it will go on, I think there will always be a need for groups. I mean worldwide, there are millions of us.

End

Highlights 4m 10s

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