The First Branches

Much is already written about the History of the beginning of The Mothers’ Union and about Mary Sumner and so the following is a reflection of the early beginnings of the Society, its growth initially in and around the villages close to Old Alresford, the main source of information being Mothers’ Union and Parish Records held at the Hampshire Record Office. There are many letters written in Mary’s own hand, all have the day and month but none have the year but with a little detective work it has been possible to link these with recorded events. Many examples are on display at this 140th celebrations.

In October 1886 a Mrs H May FitzGerald, wife of the local Magistrate, an “upper class” lady writes that she is an Associate Member of the Mothers Union. She lives in the Candover Valley, villages adjacent to Old Alresford.

In 1888 she enrolled 5 members in Bentworth, and Mrs Fitzgerald attended meetings at 6 branches in the vicinity enrolling Mothers or “poor” women; branches were also started in North and South Army Camps at Aldershot. Several Officer’s wives were enrolled. Meetings were usually held in local gentry’s “Drawing Room” and were opened in prayer by the Vicar and a short address, followed by a hymn and then Tea.

The first Journal was published in 1888 and members paid 1d per issue and 11,000 copies were sold, Mary receiving letters from all around the world. Documents indicate that each Diocese had its own “wrap around” cover with an insert of one of a numbered leaflets which had been published. Later a new design was requested for the Winchester Cover which was to be in accordance with Mrs Sumner’s wishes, namely the view of the Cathedral from the garden of No 1 The Close and the colour of the cover to be Salmon Pink..

The first prayer card was issued in 1876. This “membership card” was held in very high regard. By 1890 it was noted that “in cases of immorality the member is to resign her card. For other misdemeanours there should be a time of suspension and repentance and readmission to be prayed and hoped for”.

1888 Subscribing members are ladies who pay 1/- to the Union and promise to use the prayer daily and may be dissenters. Associates must be members of the Church of England, may be married or unmarried but must be practical workers. It was further stated that unmarried women having charge of children can be Subscribing Members but if this question cannot be decided by the Enrolling Associate it may be left to the decision of the Presiding Associate.

From 1896 there was a Central Secretary providing administrative backup for the organisation and for the President. Mary Sumner was by 1885 living in The Close, Winchester and her correspondence was undertaken by herself or her own private secretary, in some cases both contributing to a letter. After many amendments and discussions, particularly regarding the Scottish MU, and membership contributions to central funds, the MU was incorporated under the Companies Consolidation Act (1908) in 1912. During the lead up to this event the proposed Constitution was discussed in great detail and it was recommended by Mary that no Diocese should make alteration to the workings of another Diocese. Every Diocese is to use the original Mothers’ Union card and adhere to the Central organisation.

No branch shall be started or worked **without** the consent of the incumbent of the parish. Each Diocesan Council shall make its own rules for its local organisation. Early Council Minutes reflect the whole of the Society, before “Central” was established in Rooms in Church House, Westminster. Mrs Fitzgerald is indeed, Mrs Purefoy Fitzgerald, a member of the first Executive Committee which would meet at 1 The Close, Winchester.

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