

Lead on, Ladies!..... *Bishop Hall Speers, a child of Derry & Raphoe, is currently Bishop of Mahajanga in Madagascar. Having spent an elongated Covid stay at home, he recently returned to Mahajanga. Here he describes his recent MU adventure following his return....*



Having reached Mahajanga there was scarcely time to unpack, orientate, prepare and repack before departure with the Mothers Union for the Diocesan Conference. The first major shock to the system being back was the increase in food prices - a full 33% in the six months while I had been away. Yet another example of the poor suffering most. In the famine areas rice from Pakistan is being distributed. Nobody likes the taste or smell of it.

The MU is by far the biggest organisation in the worldwide Anglican Communion with over 8,000 members in Madagascar. It has a powerful and influential hierarchy here. Elections take place globally every third year. Our

diocese decided that the diocesan MU conference, elections and triennial service would take place in Maevatanana, 158 miles from Mahajanga.

The cathedral MU branch hired a bus and we assembled at 5.30 am. I arrived to find a few ladies already waiting, complete with mattresses, yellow plastic jerry cans and buckets. Eventually the bus appeared and manoeuvred into position whereupon there was a rush forward and handbags slung through the windows to 'bag' seats.

We boarded and set off after prayers for a safe journey. All of us dozed off from time to time. There was a lunch break at a roadside café and finally we arrived at the secondary school. The ladies were shown to their dormitories - school rooms with the desks piled high against the walls so that they could spread out their mattresses and mats.

By the time we had supper it was past my normal bedtime yet the evening entertainment had not begun. I gave my excuses and prepared to head for my hotel. When some of the locals heard where I was staying there were gasps of horror. "Monseigneur can't sleep there, he will be attacked in the night and robbed or worse!" I assured them I would run the riskIn the morning we rejoined the ladies at 6 am for Morning Prayer and Holy Communion.



After breakfast there was a brilliant exposition on **gender-based violence**. It was quite an eyeopener as leaders from the government Ministry of the Population took us step by step through what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Everyone was ready to answer and ask questions about that and women's rights. This was certainly the MU functioning in a most admirable way. I was taken aback to hear that under-age marriage of girls is a widespread problem. Many bandit attacks in our diocese include the rape of under-age girls.

Before supper and the evening entertainment was the election. Not having read the diocesan MU constitution it came as a shock that this had to be presided over by the bishop with a

small number of electors of whom I was one. To my delight our one and only lady priest was almost unanimously elected President.

Sunday morning the great triennial service started with a procession of witness through the centre of town including. What a sight! All the members were in their pristine white MU uniforms. In true Anglican style were led by the servers and the MU diocesan banner. All were loudly singing hymns, the clergy following, and the rear brought up by the bishop complete with cope, mitre and crozier. It was an astonishing as well as unexpected sight.



Those deemed the great and the good proceeded to a “cocktail” while the others had breakfast – only 4 hours late. In these parts, at least in church circles, a “Cocktail” is a reception with a choice of Coca Cola, Orangeade and perhaps fizzy water and biscuits and usually culminates in the formal cutting of a huge sponge cake whose icing proclaims the event. In this case it was the 25th anniversary of the founding of

Mahajanga diocesan MU and the conclusion of the triennial Conference.

Fond farewells and a lengthy process of loading buses with now empty jerry cans etc. and finally we hit the road at 4.30 pm. Back to the cathedral at 10.30 pm I staggered off to bed hoping that it all had been the great success it was claimed to be.

As always, a lot would not have happened without your generous support.

Thank you.

+Hall (abridged) 12.08.21

