

Bishop Jane gave the following homily at the 2014 ACW Conference, *Come to the Water: Women of Faith, Women of Courage*, which took place June 6-7, 2014.

Follow Me – ACW Centennial and Buyé Mother's Union Visit

It is so wonderful to be here with you this morning for our centennial eucharist together celebrating the Anglican Church Women of the diocese of Edmonton. So often anniversaries can only be times of looking back at what has been but the wonderful thing about church anniversaries is they always push us forward into thinking about what will be. The church is a living organism, a network of relationships that needs to be nurtured. It's like a tree, a living thing that, with God's grace, grows. It is both a community and a place. This morning as I look out I see that we have come from many places to be together for worship, within this diocese, farther afield in Canada and of course all the way from the diocese of Buyé in Burundi – welcome one and all.

I'd like to begin by sharing with you some words of encouragement a group of 17th century quakers in the UK wrote to encourage those who would come after them.

If we want people to follow God,

to know Jesus,

to hear the call of the Spirit,

then they must see something in our lives that leads them to want to know more.

Today we celebrate that the members of the ACW and our visitors from the Mothers Union are people who are trying to live out a life in Christ that shows that face, words and actions of Jesus in the world and you are people who believe that living in such a way leads the people who meet you to want to know more about Jesus.

How exactly do you do this? Well if I look back at some of the members of the ACW I have known in this diocese I can give you some clues. You live tirelessly giving your talents and time for others, you work to raise up the church, you teach and inspire the people around you. I remember people in this diocese like Edna Loveridge, Charlotte Hughes, Ann Mackenzie, Elma Parker, Mary Steer, Linda Courtis. I could go on. I could look around this cathedral church this morning and point out women here today who are committed to making a difference in this world and I give thanks for all of you.

The women of the church started out of course as girls in the church, being taught and mentored by their mothers, their aunties and grandmothers and their sisters. Through trial and error, some of it humorous, we have learned to grab our faith and to live it out.

Our faith in Jesus calls us to look out at the world and really see it. To notice those who are forgotten, those who are lost and those who are invisible – right there in the second pew from the

back in our churches. To notice them as much as we notice those who demand our attention – those who try to wake us up in the middle of the night.

The church must be a community in which all members, equally, encourage each other to discover and develop their gifts and ministries in the countless areas of human existence where transformation and renewal are needed. For us to do that we the church must go and reach out to people. I think that think ‘going out’ is at the heart of the ministry and mission of the ACW and the mother’s union.

ACW members, for 100 years in this diocese first as the WA and now as the ACW you have helped to spread the love of God by pointing to issues and places in society where that love is not seen. You encourage us to share the love we have received and the signs of that love – the gifts and treasure we have been given. You give away so much of the money you raise and teach the church that we are not to hoard anything but share everything for the love of God. It is that kind of love that says the church is about creating places where people can come and ask the big questions, the questions that matter, where people can find someone who will walk with them and teach them, places where we don’t get distracted by protecting what we think is ours and make the kingdom of God an ever smaller place where we expect less and less and less. Places where we learn what it means to follow and not to lead.

I have told the story before of my last term at school. We all had dancing lessons that were compulsory as we prepared for the Upper Sixth leavers dance. We were being carefully prepared so that if the Headmaster or any other member of staff should pick us as partners for the snowball waltz we would not embarrass ourselves or the school by stumbling around the dance floor. The final instruction of the last lesson was what to do if you were a girl and the headmaster picked you as his dance partner “Let him lead!” I realize now that this was probably the most important spiritual direction I was ever likely to hear. Let God lead, just follow him and you will not go wrong.

Almost the first words Jesus says to his disciples are ‘follow me’ and now almost the last words which we heard in our reading today are ‘follow me’. It must be important to him don’t you think, that we follow. We are all called and we are all in this together to go wherever God leads us, in the power of his name.

All of us here are called to hold up God and his church on waves of prayer each and every day and to be part of the incredible plan of God for the transformation of this world. This morning we celebrate the calling together of women in Christ who seek to be nurtured by Christ and to nurture others.

100 years of a very special ministry, and that ministry has come in some very special packing – in pastry of countless pies, in every stitch of blankets and baby clothes, in boxes of dirt sent to the arctic so people could grow things, in countless school children fostered throughout the world, in literacy programs, in community suppers, those are all doing kinds of things aren’t they? But the packing of ministry also looks like endless conversations about faith and times of prayer around kitchen tables, by hospital beds, it looks like thousands and thousands of scrunpled up tissues with the tears of the pain of broken relationships, it looks like rides to

women's shelters, it look like cupcakes for the birthday celebrations of the truth and reconciliation commission. The ministry never ends and constantly takes new shapes and forms. God bless you for that.

Since the early days we have changed how we meet and when we meet. You just as much as the rest of the church are now called to be even more flexible – I know my body finds it harder to be flexible as I get older but Jesus tries to prevent his church from getting achey joints and stubborn muscles and we are called to be flexible we have learned that a pie is a pie is a pie and that store bought pies and ice cream are just as good as home made when the young working mum still wants to contribute to the summer social, we have learned that if we switch our meetings to the afternoon because we don't like to go out at night that we cannot complain that the younger women don't come and join us because they are all at work, we have learned that we must find new times to meet, new times to study scripture together and to pray. Some women I know have a quick prayer together everyday on the phone before they go to work and to get the children ready for school. Other women are teaching young women how to knit and to bake and over those tasks have deep conversations about faith and life.

We might say the church is not like it used to be – indeed it is not – but of course it is not supposed to be because life has changed. The challenge is to find out what the church is called to be and look like in this day and age, to look for new ministries, to revive sleeping ones and to carry on asking God what we should be doing.

One of my hopes for the next hundred years of women's ministry in this diocese is to explore a very real partnership between the ACW and the Mother's Union of Buye, to devote some serious time to praying about what we might do together and how we might hold one another up in prayer. But that is a conversation for another day.

This morning we look back and say thanks be to God, Thanks be to God for giving us the opportunities that we have had to serve him, thanks be to God for blessing us so abundantly that we can share our blessings, thanks be to God for willing hearts and a spirit of generosity, but above all thanks be to God for his son Jesus Christ, who trusts us with this his most precious body – the church – who trusts us with his brothers and sisters and makes them ours, thanks be to Jesus for having a plan for this world and sticking by us, and simply saying to us 'follow me'.

Jesus lead the ACW of this diocese forward into the next one hundred years and may your spirit working in us do infinitely more that we can ask or imagine.

AMEN