

Reading: John 12:44-50

In a parish a long way from here, my wife Rosemary and I thought it would be a good idea if the vicarage had new lights in the lounge. We were having trouble seeing. Vestry seemed reluctant to pay the expense so I had a cunning plan.

“Don’t worry dear,” I said, “I know a thing or two about wiring. You buy the lights and I’ll put them up.”

“Are you sure?” she said.

“Yes, of course I’m sure. What could possibly go wrong?”

The lights were purchased and, with the help of the kids, I started on the wiring process. I turned off the power and turned my attention to the wires. What I found surprised me. The wiring was so old that it wasn’t colour coded. In fact, it was all a sort of off-white.

The girls were becoming anxious. “Do you really know what you are doing dad?” they said.

“Of course. There are only 16 possible combinations...”

“When I turn back on the power it might be best if we hide behind the sofa,” I said. So we did. There wasn’t anything to worry about. The flames soon died down and the smell of burning rubber only took a month or two to fade.

The point of the story is that disconnections can be dangerous - whether it’s in wiring or in our faith.

Today we hear of the intimate connection between Jesus and the Father. Jesus concludes: “What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.” This connection is also handed on to those who believe in Jesus. (“Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in Him who sent me.”) In saying this Jesus is explaining that this total connectedness that He has with God the Father is a relationship that we plug into. By accepting Jesus we are connecting ourselves to God and, ultimately, to eternal life.

We know, too, that God was present in Jesus’ life and ministry in a powerful way and, in this Easter season, we especially remember God’s presence and power in Jesus’ rising again.

I’ve been an honorary member of the AAW for some 50 years. I can’t join for obvious reasons, but Mum was a member when I was a baby. She used to take me along when I was still in the pram. My first memories were of lots of handbags and legs because, of course, this is all you can see from a pram. I later found out it was called the Mothers’ Union. This sounded very radical to me. Unions fought for people’s rights, so I figured it was an organization dedicated to fighting for the rights of mothers. What a great thing!

My grandmother was a missionary in the Solomon Islands. There, she founded the Mothers’ Union which championed the rights of mothers. My grandmother told me how the sailors would come and leer at the young mums because, in those days, women went topless in that culture. At the Mothers’ Union she taught them to sew clothes, to protect themselves and to grow rice.

You don’t need me to tell you the goals and mission statement of AAW: to unite in prayer and participate in the mission of the Church, and to promote, safeguard and nurture Christian family life. But I want to suggest that, like my attempt at wiring, there is a disconnect between what we say AAW is for and how it lives out its daily life.

In most AAW groups what is being done to promote, safeguard or nurture family life?

My experience of AAW is that it is full of lovely people - often people who are the backbone of the parish and diocese. But rather than connecting with families, AAW has become a kind of spiritual women’s Probus.

I think if we are going to grow in discipleship, dreams and dedication (which is our theme for 2014-18), one thing we need to do is to re-imagine what it would be like to be serving families - families in our community.

When St Mary's AAW in Timaru asked themselves how they could serve families, one idea they came up with was to put care packs together for new mums. Each pack had a toothbrush (to get rid of that awful fuzzy feeling you get when you haven't brushed your teeth for a few days), a flannel for the baby, a guide to changing a nappy and a prayer for the newborn. They completed each pack with a little message that said, 'With love from St Mary's Association of Anglican Women'. More than one family came for baptism because of that simple gift.

I remember once, at an AAW gathering, people were lamenting the lack of young women among them. One delegate suggested they make AAW pinnies and go and feed breakfast to the local primary school children. She suggested that if they did this, young women would see the point of AAW.

There is nothing more attractive than a group of people doing what they can to help others. Those watching on want to know why. They want to know what makes a group of people give up time and resources for no obvious personal gain.

In 1876, when her eldest daughter Margaret gave birth, Mary Sumner was reminded how difficult she had found motherhood. Inspired, Mary called a meeting of mothers in the parish to offer mutual support. Her plan was quite radical in its day as it involved asking women of all social classes to support one another and to see motherhood as a profession that was as important as the work men did, if not more so. The first meeting was held in the Rectory. Mary was so overcome by nervousness that her husband had to speak for her and invite the women to return next week. At that second meeting she had gathered enough courage to lead her own meeting. Today there are 3.8 million members of the Mothers' Union across the globe. And there are many Associations of Anglican Women.

My dream is that the AAW will not be overwhelmed by the task ahead of us, but rather, that it will take every opportunity to reconnect itself with its primary mission calling which is the nurture and support of the family.

I began by demonstrating how disconnections can be dangerous. Jesus demonstrated a new way a way of total connection with God. And, Mary Sumner's story showed us how, when we are true and connected to our mission, we can change the world for the better.

May the same be true for the AAW.