

WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES III

26 May 2004

The Hon. A.L. EVANS: I want to speak this afternoon about the World Congress of Families III. At the end of March this year, this international conference was convened in Mexico City over three intensive days. The Congress was truly ecumenical and international. Over 3 000 delegates came from all over North America, Central and South America, Europe, Britain, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan and Korea. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Catholics, and Mormons were active participants. There were a number of Muslims, too, from countries of Africa and Eastern Europe as well as some very prominent Jewish delegates.

Many of the delegates to the conference have been engaged in significant work to promote the health, well-being and sustainability of the family in the modern world. Foundational principles for study, debate and discussion at the conference included the recognition of the natural family as the fundamental social unit. Many prominent international experts presented their work on the vital importance of the family for the social and economic health of societies. The importance of marriage was explored as foundational to stable and healthy family life, bringing security, contentment, meaning and joy to spouses. Men and women committed to each other in a marriage relationship were seen to be the best guarantee of an optimal environment for the healthy development of children.

The delegates were able to study and discuss the rapidly growing tide of research evidence showing that children growing up with the close involvement of both the natural mother and father in an intact family have by far the best chances in life on every conceivable and measurable outcome. The relationship with hundreds of different outcomes for the child's growth and development in an intact natural family holds true even when all other socioeconomic variables are accounted for. The congress therefore raised the vital importance of the development of policies and legislative change at all government levels that are better able to promote the health, stability and sustainability of natural families.

The health and status of the natural family, and therefore marriage, was seen to be linked to the many significant social and economic issues confronting societies all over the globe. Speakers discussed the social and economic dimensions of the family and the increasing serious ramifications for family breakdown and destabilisation.

The key item of the conference was an exploration of the economic concept of 'social capital' as a way of quantifying all positive benefits and contributions that healthy families make to vibrant, sustainable and healthy societies and economies. Problems arising from the impact of industrialisation, capitalism and socialism were explored. Some speakers evaluated the historic development that had changed the situation of families in order to improve the understanding of the forces working for and against families.

A number of leading government representatives from around the globe were able to offer details on the policy and legislative changes being introduced within their countries. Policies in relation to taxation, welfare, family law and population were discussed. Presentations from Latvian and Italian delegates were especially interesting as they explained the ways that their governments were trying to grapple with a looming demographic crisis. In particular, they outlined some of the strategies that they were implementing to enhance women's choices and the capacity to balance their work and career needs with their desire to have children.

One of the key themes of the conference was a growing sense of crisis about the bereft state of the family around the world and the need for governments to act to restore their focus on enhancing the family's status and health. Another key theme was a sense of confidence over the great development of resources and growing sense of unity of purpose among the many organisations working for change.