

The Family in America

A JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY

The World Congress of Families Model: A Remembrance

Paul T. Mero

IN OCTOBER 1997, JOHN C. HOWARD AND ALLAN C. CARLSON formed The Howard Center for Family, Religion & Society, publisher of *The Family in America* and parent organization of World Congress of Families. The Howard Center, to this day, is a Virginia corporation doing business in Illinois, in large part, due to the partnership created between me and these wonderful gentlemen—I came from ten years in Congress and a fledgling non-profit based in Virginia to provide the legal entity that became The Howard Center.

By March 1998, my family and I lived in Rockford. And by May of 1998, I was in Rome, Italy, huddled with two-dozen people from around the world in a tiny first-century church basement, deliberating the next step in the newly formed World Congress of Families (WCF). As Executive Vice-President of The Howard Center, and in a formal administrator's role for the WCF, my place at that table was to support Allan Carlson; protect the WCF brand for The Howard Center; and care for our international guests. As a longtime culture warrior, knowing that the decisions the group made in Rome would have lasting impact on the future of the WCF, my informal self-appointed role was to ensure that our work had a sustainable vision as, ultimately, the group crafted what has now become the defining document within the WCF world—its definition of the natural family.

I remember the group's struggle with the first few words of that definition's opening sentence, "The natural family is the fundamental social unit . . ." I knew that if we lost on this point, we would lose the lasting value and effect of this fledgling movement. Allan, however, was

able to steer the group in support of this key point of pro-family doctrine, and, as a result, the second WCF gathering in Geneva, Switzerland, in November 1999, was themed with those exact words.

From those early years, those words have, with only minor revision, led the official declarations of all WCF meetings to follow. Even in Amsterdam, at the fifth WCF gathering, its formal declaration reads,

The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

From Geneva to Sydney (the site of WCF VII this past May), the WCF formal declarations state that the natural family is the fundamental unit of society. This *doctrine* is what binds people of good will, of orthodox faiths, to fight to protect the natural family and religious freedom worldwide. It is the key to the WCF movement—without it the movement would easily collapse from religious disagreement. With it, the movement overcomes and sets aside inherent religious disagreements to unite in strength behind one common ideal to challenge common enemies globally.

The WCF organizing model, capably maintained for over 16 years, is a political gem bordering on sacred. It is no respecter of persons, unlike political organizing models both right and left. It does not objectify diverse people, and insists on one thing and one thing only: all WCF participants set aside their religious differences and embrace family as the fundamental unit of society. The great successes of each of the completed seven WCF gatherings stem from this unwritten understanding and leadership. There are few political experiences more uplifting than sitting in a WCF gathering and realizing the diversity of God's children surrounding you, all dedicated to a common and righteous cause. Large or small, every WCF gathering is a celebration.

Case in point: WCF V in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, August 10-12, 2009. I am honored to have been involved with the WCF from its earliest years—administering the Geneva gathering in 1999 and speaking at gatherings in Warsaw, Amsterdam, and Sydney—and I have seen the good and the bad. WCF V in Amsterdam faced many challenges, but those challenges notwithstanding, the local organizing committee did succeed.

The most impressive proof of their success might be the subsequent publication of *Family in Development: Hopes and Challenges*, a collection of speeches from the WCF V gathering.¹ While literally dozens of speeches were delivered at the Amsterdam meeting, the book's editors wisely chose remarks to reflect the theme of family in the context of developing countries (a refreshing change from the all-too-common Euro-centric and United Nations-centric focus of most WCF gatherings).

In its Introduction, the editors set this context for discussion about the natural family in developing countries,

Most lectures have in common that, explicitly or implicitly, the authors take their starting point in a view on the family sometimes called the natural family: a married heterosexual couple potentially with children. . . . Those who hold this position do not deny that there are many instances where the natural family does not function well and is in fact not a safe place for all of its members. . . . In most societies, not least in the global South, this concept of the natural family is upheld as a basic value. The authors are conscious of the fact that this claim is being challenged, both in theory and in practice. . . . The authors argue that wherever possible, the stability and continuity of the family should be cherished and supported. And wherever threatened, either conservation of what is left of family structures, or restoration of those structures should be pursued. In that sense stable families are both a precondition for and a result of social development, wherever it takes place.

The opening chapter of *Family in Development: Hopes and Challenges* sets the proper tone for the book. Titled “The Power of the African Family,” speaker Moise Napon, the General Secretary of the Christian Relief and Development Organization in Burkina Faso, expertly describes the intended role and existence of the family in Africa—only our dear friend, the late Margaret Ogola, has equaled this African narrative, in my opinion.

1 Simon Polinder, Evert Jan Brouwer, and Henk Jochemsen, eds., *Family in Development: Hopes and Challenges* (Maastricht, the Netherlands: Shaker Publishing, 2010).

Napon easily explains the juxtaposition of ideal and reality for Africa's families. On the one hand, nobly and courageously, Napon states the ideal:

The family is the fundamental unit of society. It ensures social reproduction. It is the first institution that socializes individuals. It is where people learn how to live in society. It is also within this framework that the essential daily activities of individuals are performed. Although the concept of family has changed over time, and its composition varies with the context, it continues to be the fundamental unit of all societies.

On the other hand, Napon describes African reality and the family:

The traditional African perception of the family tends to be that of a large extended family. The African terminology related to family is limited but the vocabulary related to relationships is very rich. Consequently, sociologists came to define the African family as an institution that embraced the entirety of persons united by marriage, filiations, consanguinity, and relationships. Thus, the African familial relationships have strong social characteristics that are not necessarily biological and restrictive.

Whether the book's editors are addressing South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America, whether they address poverty or sex trafficking or HIV epidemics or the media, *Family in Development: Hopes and Challenges* reminds us, especially the WCF faithful, that the natural family is resilient, and that our commonalities overshadow any disagreements we might have. In other words, this book exactly embodies the spirit of the World Congress of Families. And, as the WCF family moves to Moscow in 2014, we would do well to remind ourselves that despite our geographic and geo-political diversity, our movement is strong and relentless.

Paul T. Mero is the president of Sutherland Institute.