

The family is central to a healthy, happy Australia in 2020

A reflection by ACBC President Archbishop Philip Wilson

The Australia 2020 Summit, convened by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, will be a fascinating exercise in community consultation on a massive scale.

According to Mr Rudd, the outcomes of the Summit will help the government “to shape a long term strategy for the nation’s future”.

The scope of its agenda is mind-boggling in itself, covering the economy, the nation’s infrastructure, the environment, farmers, health care, indigenous Australians, the arts, national security, how we improve our system of government, and how we strengthen our communities and ensure nobody is left out of Australia’s future.

I have had the honour of being selected to take part in the Summit in the area entitled “Strengthening Communities, Supporting Families and Social Inclusion”, and I am looking forward to the experience immensely.

As I prepare for the Summit and think and pray on the issues involved, it seems to me that the family is the key issue. The family is the basic building block of our society and when we value families and enact policies which strengthen them, we in turn strengthen our communities and go a long way towards social inclusion.

We all know that many families are doing it very tough in very many different ways. Whether it is the pressure of work demands, or marriage and family breakdown, health issues or rising interest rates, the pressures are there and they are very real. This summit is an opportunity for people from different walks of life to identify those key pressures, and in putting their heads together, come up with some creative ideas for how to help ease those pressures across the community, in positive, life-giving ways.

There will no doubt be many different opinions amongst those present and there will an opportunity to listen to them all. As Catholics, we have a particular vision of good human values which play an important part in the life of our society, and I will be energetically putting that vision forward in the Summit dialogue. I look forward to developing relationships with people in the conversations that will be going on, and in that spirit, bringing some influence to bear on the Summit’s deliberations out of our faith framework.

The background paper prepared by the Summit organisers gives a raft of statistics and research findings which paint a comprehensive picture of the strengths and challenges that lie ahead for our society. These include an ageing population, changing migration patterns, the importance of family as an anchor-point for support networks, family breakdown, changing patterns of workforce participation, disability issues and the need for support, housing stress, lack of retirement income, problem gambling, substance abuse and crime.

The challenges are many, but in embarking on this unique experience during this, the Easter season, my faith fills me with hope for what can be achieved. I ask for your prayers, both personally, and for the success of the Summit and its outcomes.