



Thoughts on Volunteerism
from
Dr. Harold G. Koenig, Founder and Co-Director,
Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health
at Duke University

Volunteerism: The True “Fountain of Youth”

As active participants in caring for others through the spirit of volunteering, all of you know the benefits for your care receivers. Whether it's having a meal delivered, being driven to a doctor's appointment or getting help for minor home repairs, you know that the lives of those less fortunate are improved by the wonderful acts of volunteerism and caring that go on everyday through your *Faith in Action* programs. But the benefits go well beyond these practical areas. By being shown that they are loved and are not isolated from society, those being helped live happier and more peaceful lives.

And how many times have we heard a volunteer say, “I get more out of this relationship than the person whom I'm helping.” There's no question that the wonderful works you do are a “win/win” situation. For the past 20 years, Dr. Harold Koenig has been studying the effects of volunteerism on the mental and physical health of older adults, in particular on the health of *those who are doing the volunteering*. Recently, Dr. Koenig was the keynote speaker at the annual volunteer appreciation luncheon for the *Faith in Action* program in Winston-Salem at The Shepherd's Center. His remarks were so well received that we thought it would be worthwhile to interview him and share his thoughts with our *Faith in Action* family across the country.

It's ironic that Dr. Koenig's interest in faith-based volunteerism began about the same time, in the early 1980's, that a group of religious and healthcare leaders approached The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation about the idea of funding a new concept called *interfaith volunteer caregiving*. Dr. Koenig saw the same dynamics that Arthur Flemming, Dr. Ken Johnson, Terry Keenan and the other founders of the *Faith in Action* movement saw. The population was aging...government programs could not keep up... volunteerism through faith congregations could have a huge positive impact on the challenge of caring for the elderly.

For Dr. Koenig, volunteerism is a major contributor to the successful aging of the population. By caring for others and practicing the *Golden Rule*, the health of the volunteers, not just the well being of those helped, is dramatically improved. He cited a recent study published in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, in which it was shown at the DNA level that the aging of cells in women who are suffering from stress and anxiety is a decade faster than those who are at peace. And caring for others is one of the main ways people find peace and a sense of value in their later years. Dr. Koenig calls this the real “fountain of youth”. If we want to live longer, healthier and happier lives, we should give of ourselves to others. The answer is not in a pill or material items. It's in our hearts!



Contact: 512.582.2197, info@nvcnetwork.org; www.nvcnetwork.org

While he acknowledges that Americans do a great deal of volunteering, Dr. Koenig says that we're not doing enough. Although government statistics show that about 65 million Americans did some volunteer work at least once in 2004, there are not enough involved in true volunteer *relationships*, the type that *Faith in Action* produces. On average, volunteers contribute about an hour a week. Dr. Koenig says this has to reach 4 hours to make a big difference. And not enough young people or "baby boomers" are active in volunteering. The number one reason that people give for not volunteering is "I don't have the time." But even as they retire and have more time, "baby boomers" are not volunteering as much as they could.

This is where you and your caring neighbors come in. You are *role models* for the rest of society. The more others see the impact of your works, the more they will become involved. What's great about the work you do is that the benefits are long-term and impact society as a whole. Families become spiritually richer. The community in which you live becomes a better place.

Dr. Koenig sees *Faith in Action* as the model for this movement. How to motivate more people to become involved in their local *Faith in Action* programs is the challenge we all face. We probably don't talk enough about what the volunteers get from their works. Can we appeal to everyone's innate self-interest of living longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives? Dr. Koenig thinks we can and should.

Larry Weisberg
Faith in Action
Director of Communications