The Power of Volunteerism

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On July 1, 2002, I completed my 10-year term as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the American College of Cardiology. What a great privilege it was. I retired from the University of California–San Francisco School of Medicine on February 1, 2003, and in April 2003 was called to be a full-time volunteer for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. My wife and I moved to Salt Lake City in May 2003. In this six-year calling as a general authority of the church, I have had a chance to see first hand the power of volunteerism in society. I thought it might be of interest to readers to outline some of my impressions of this critical role we can all play in the world around us.

One premise of volunteerism is that we are all the same family of man (and God), and, therefore, we have a deep-rooted responsibility to help each other in a world filled with illiteracy, hunger, poverty, disease, death, major disasters, atrocities, war, and an endless number of other problems. We believe that we are all spirit children of a loving father in heaven, so that referring to each other as brother or sister implies that we are truly related to each other as family members. When we extend the feelings we have about our own families to the rest of the world, I believe we are on the right path toward understanding our responsibility to the family of God. As one great prophet said: “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings, ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). Although a belief in deity is not essential to serve others in this way, I believe it provides an important spiritual framework for our actions.

I believe that physicians have a wonderful record of volunteerism in their communities and throughout the world. Part of that comes from relative affluence, which first of all gives us the opportunity to donate to worthy causes, but also allows us to spend segments of time volunteering our services to the international community where medical help is greatly needed. Although my medical expertise is not a major part of my current calling, I have observed retired physicians who donate their time and expertise to helping others free of charge. They are having the time of their lives in ways they would not have expected. As a full-time volunteer, I have also appreciated not receiving any remuneration for my efforts. Of necessity, retirement has meant that we live a simpler life where AARP coupons mean something! This simpler life, however, has helped us avoid many of the distractions of the world and to concentrate on things that have become much greater in importance—namely, how we can best help others.

The American College of Cardiology is dependent upon the volunteer efforts of its member physicians. In addition to the usual opportunities for service, the College is providing other opportunities for retired physicians who can use their expertise in a continuing manner. The College is to be commended, along with other associations such as the American Heart Association, where the efforts of many volunteers are joined to control the deadly effects of all forms of heart disease.

In our church, we have 50,000 to 55,000 young missionaries (age 19 to 25 years) who are serving at any one time around the world (mostly young men, but some young women), who spend one day per week in humanitarian efforts. They mature quickly when they concentrate on serving others. I have been especially interested in observing those couples who have retired and are now volunteering their services for blocks of time averaging 18 months each. We have 4,000 to 5,000 retired couples who are volunteering their time to serve wherever they are needed around the world. Most of these are in some kind of humanitarian effort where their expertise can be particularly useful. The church has provided humanitarian assistance to 150 countries including 144 major disasters since 1986. During that time period, 41,000 tons of food, 5,300 tons of medical equipment, 51,300 tons of surplus clothing, and 4,386 tons of educational supplies have been provided, mostly by volunteer efforts. Friends of ours returned from a humanitarian mission to Romania where they served in the orphanages. One Idaho potato farmer and his wife served in Russia where they taught farmers how to increase their crop of potatoes. There are 3,000 welfare missionaries serving in 55 countries. As I observe these couples unselfishly giving of their time and efforts, at the same time that they are fully self-supporting, I am amazed at how much good they can do, and at how much it changes their own lives. There is a principle of power related to service that transforms us forever. We will never be the same again after we have experienced the joy of serving others full-time. As I think about the vast numbers of retired physicians and others in this country, I am struck by the reservoir of power that exists if every retired couple spent two years or more in humanitarian service. We will never solve all of the
world’s problems, but we can do something. More importantly, we can radically change our own perspective about what is really important in this life. For those of you who have “retired” or are approaching retirement age, I would strongly advise you to look into such opportunities. You will never regret it. Some worry that they will miss associations with children, births of grandchildren, special events, and so on. Experience has shown that their moral example of doing what is right is a powerful blessing for the rest of the family. Rather than begrudge this time away, to the contrary, my experience with couples is that they look back on this time as the best time in their lives. Think about it, plan for it, and do it.

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