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SUMMIT ON
VOLUNTEERISM
A Response to
Economic Crisis

Rev. Mark Farr, Points of Light

Pleasure to be here and thank you very much to Knights for inviting me to come. In fact, with all these bishops and priests I see walking around here; I have to tell you that I'm actually an imposter, since I'm an Episcopalian priest. But I'm actually the nicest imposter you'll ever meet.

So I work with Points of Light and we have been very blessed by the generosity of the Knights who've been giving us a grant for our daily Point of Light for many years and we're very thankful for that.

We stand at a moment of quite awesome opportunity, where it feels like the wheel of the society is changing, it's turning at this very moment. And I was asked from my little perch in Washington, DC, to say a little bit about the Faith Office in the new administration – there's been a couple of mentions of it earlier, but say a little bit more about that. As many of you know, Josh DuBois the 26-year-old Pentecostal black minister from Chicago is the new head. That in itself I think says something in contrast from some of the previous occupants of that post. I think it's very likely to be much more minority driven, much more diverse, much more interfaith. I think that affects us as Catholics and Episcopalians, for that matter.

Secondly, it now has a council, which it never had before. Some of those folks on that council you may well know. Jim Wallace, my old boss; Judy Vredenburg from Big Brothers, Big Sisters; David Saperstein from the Religious Action Center for Reformed Judaism. So there is quite a lot of diversity. Right there you can see change. And I think we have to think, in terms of this economic response to the economic situation, how we as – this, your organization and mine connect to that particular organization. And I think we have to think about the makeup of it to think how we respond.

Thirdly, I think that the greatest challenge this nation is facing isn't the economic crisis. Actually, it's how we are going to deal in the next 25 years with our religious minorities. It's on our papers every day, it's in our foreign policy, it's right there with us. Now I think there's a fantastic opportunity, because service and service like yours, is the Knights and many of the organizations here, is a fantastic vehicle to reach into those fragmented communities and bring us together in a way that we have not seen in years. So I very – that's my belief about that. This economic crisis will pass, our organizations will continue. The question is: how are we going to deal with faith traditions and welcome them and involve them and bring them in?

Fourthly, I think we have to recast volunteering. Its not about leaf raking anymore. I think we have to recast volunteering as citizenship, as sheer humanity, in fact. That is how we have to do this. Service is a vehicle not of going to somewhere and doing something, it is a vehicle to connect people to people. And as we see it like that, as just the warp and weft of our families and our friends and our churches and for that matter, our mosques, we will make a difference in this community and change the economic climate, and for that matter, the nature of faith.



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Finally, on that area, I think in that terms – in terms of recasting volunteering, I said it wasn't about leaf raking any more, I think it is and it does have, therefore, a security aspect. We have to think about how we relate to organizations who think in terms very different from ours about those other faiths and so forth, and bring to them something much more positive than I think has been the case so far.

What are the action steps? What is the agenda? Here's the agenda as Points of Light sees it in the next few years to respond. I've got 7.5 points for you all.

First of all, we need to develop unusual partnerships, partnerships of the unlike minded. We've all spend far too long connecting with organizations we know well. I connect with the United Way. I love Mei Cobb, she was my friend, but Points of Light knows United Way very, very well. We do not know GE as half as well. That kind of unusual innovative partnership is much more interesting, much more likely to create something innovative and new and different in our communities.

Second point, get out of the ghetto. And this relates to my first point above. It's not a niche market any more. It's not special, it's what it is to be human. I'll leave that where it is.

Third point, be big. It's no longer enough to just be this little tiny organization. We won't manage it like that. There are many, many organizations being born – Service Nation you may have heard of, it's one of them – where it's a conglomeration of all we are trying to do. Many people have different agendas, but we can bring them together and say something which we would never say in the marketplace if we were just a hundred fragmented organizations. We need to bring them together. The Knights have a fantastic, I think, opportunity in that marketplace to do exactly that.

Fourthly, be small. What happens with those big organizations is they get heavy and bureaucratic. Sometimes my organization has done that. But the ferment of little people, little organizations doing things in their place of work and things in their communities is really, really crucial. And if we can encourage those, encourage them to survive and grow and develop, I think that's the fourth point.

Fifthly, we have to get on Fox News. A friend of mine, Naomi Wolf – yes, I know. We all have that reaction don't we? Fox News, or any news, whatever it is. My old friend Naomi Wolf, a feminist author, told me one time when I went to see her, she said, "Mark, you could never get on Fox News." She said, "Look at me." And that's quite right. She's very glamorous and very attractive to look at, talks like an angel. And I couldn't do that. Somehow we have lacked the skills, the media skills to get out there. So they want to talk to us and our standard can't be the local Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live, sort of internal, intra-video camera thing. It's got to be Fox News, CNN. What we've got to say has got to speak to the nation and the marketplace. So think about your standard of market media visibility as getting on Fox News. Could you do that? And if you can't, how do you get to do it?

Sixthly, flip the speakers. Those speakers who we have normally tended to put out front have been just the wrong people. Instead of those highfalutin kinds of well paid people with suits and whatever, we need to take the people from the food banks in our organization. Just a little bit of coaching and they turn into much better spokespeople than all those people who stand at the front and are used to it and do it for a living. They are better in fact because they see it passionately.



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Seventhly, we've got to talk to the government. I'll leave that one alone.

And seventh and a half, my last point, I think I have never heard a more stupid or wrong statement as, practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty, or whatever that phrase is. Erase that from your mind. The one thing we do not need right now are senseless or random acts. We need sustained, long-term committed partnerships in this world. Thank you.