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The Faith Factor

Winston J. Craig

Andrews University, wcraig@andrews.edu

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the FAITH FACTOR

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Those who regularly attend church and pray have better health and live longer!

Well-designed studies from leading universities have recently shown religious beliefs and practices are positively associated with one's mental health and physical well-being. Over 600 studies now provide evidence that people who attend religious services regularly and are more committed to their faith have better mental health, greater social support, and live healthier lifestyles. This translates into better physical health for those who live their faith, fewer visits to the doctor, shorter hospital stays, less expenditure for healthcare, and a greater survival rate.

Furthermore, those who attend church regularly have greater marital satisfaction, less anxiety over their problems, and less depression. People with a strong religious commitment not only suffer less depression, but show a 70 percent speedier recovery from depression. Religious involvement also reduces risky health behaviors, including reduced alcohol and drug use.

People who attend religious services, pray, or study the Bible were 40 percent less likely to have elevated blood pressure, and hence a lowered risk of stroke. Studies found that patients who had open-heart surgery and who received solace and comfort from their religious beliefs were found to be three times more likely to survive than those who did not have a religious faith.

With all of these health benefits it should come as no surprise that those who frequently attend religious

services have a 20–30 percent reduction in risk of death, and hence live longer. In fact, Robert Hummer reported that African-Americans who attended religious services more than once a week lived 14 years longer than those who did not attend church. For White Americans, regular church attendance provided a seven-year advantage.

Religion may be an important way for people to cope with stress, thereby ameliorating the negative effects of stress on their immune system. Recently, Harold Koenig found that men and women who regularly attended religious services were only one-half as likely to have elevated interleukin-6 levels (an indicator of a compromised immune system), than those who were less involved. Research conducted at Stanford University also found that religious involvement was positively associated with numbers of white blood cells and natural killer cells in the body.

Religious beliefs often provide an optimism that imbues traumatic life events with real purpose and meaning. Church attendance also appears to be therapeutic for health. According to Herbert Benson, worship services are full of potentially therapeutic elements such as music, prayer and contemplation, familiar rituals, distraction from everyday tensions, fellowship, and useful education. Religion appears to be more closely related to health than many people realize (see *Counsels on Health*, p. 566).

Winston J. Craig is professor of nutrition at Andrews University.