**Spiritual Formation for Healthcare Professionals**

<https://cmda.org/article/spiritual-formation-for-healthcare-professionals/>

by Kenneth Lim, MD, PhD, MPhil, FASN

God cares about our heart. This intensely personal, though simple, truth can at times be immensely difficult to grasp, particularly when it comes to the demands and culture of practicing healthcare in today’s society.

God cares about our heart.

This intensely personal, though simple, truth can at times be immensely difficult to grasp, particularly when it comes to the demands and culture of practicing healthcare in today’s society. Stress, long hours, and the demands that students, residents, and healthcare professionals endure can drastically affect the soul. We must speak of the pervasive problem of physician burnout1 as a movement of our healthcare sector in need of urgent change. The accumulative exposure to suffering, illness, abuse and neglect among our patients can easily tear the fragile reality of the human heart, if it is not concretely grounded with an ethic of refusal and a maturity of intent to the renewing power of Christ. Limitations in time and the nature of medicine can tie the soul-searching healthcare professional behind the walls of an institution, foster feelings of isolation and steal away from Christian community. This can leave the necessary condition for continued life-giving relationships largely unmet. The chief of a successful internal medicine program once shared with me during a casual conversation how a lifelong career in hospital medicine can be often unsustainable, and his plans for a major career shift and quick escape. Inter-twined within the tangled depths of my heart, something just did not feel right about that conversation. I have always felt that there has to be something more than this for those of us who are called to be God’s hands and feet through our work in healthcare. In an institution overflowing with the sick and in need of a higher power, our response to these needs must not be solely a contented action that ignores the soul and our spiritual health. When I was a medical student making that exciting transition into the clinical years of my training, the leader of my young adult fellowship who happened to be a clinical oncologist once wrote me a simple email that radically shifted the trajectory of my spiritual journey. It said,

*The decisions you make now about how you choose to live your life will form the foundations and shape and inform your spiritual walk with Jesus for the rest of your career as a doctor.*

The wisdom of these words set me on a wild journey to discover the secrets behind crafting a rule of life that will help sustain a lifetime of emotionally healthy spirituality in medicine.

**THE ERA OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

I love Rembrandt van Rijn’s 17th-century painting of The Return of the Prodigal Son that hangs in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia. I can stare at this painting for hours, gradually identifying with each figure—the rebellious son, the dutiful older brother, and the compassion-filled father. However, something extremely comforting draws me to the father’s loving embrace of his son in this painting. The transformative love he displays looks beyond all the sins and disappointments of his son, and it shows a love like the love spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13 that could actually come to occupy the human heart. If only there was a way to constantly draw from an unending stream of this healing and restorative love, countercurrent from the often-destructive waves of secularism and the demands of modern healthcare. Tapping into such a heavenly reality wrapped in the true, loving embrace of our Heavenly Father takes more than just discipleship or a thorough exegesis of Scripture. A search for this transformative power took me on a journey across many oceans. In my journey, I found that humanity cannot be separated from the continued healing and transformative power of God if we are to live a life that cultivates intimacy with Him. Dallas Willard wrote, “The hunger of the human heart that is unfed by what is authentic will go for what is inauthentic.”2 The demands and exposure of modern healthcare in the Western world threaten to dramatically affect our relationship with God and move us away from coming to Him in intimacy and prayer, if we are not consciously doing something about it. Thankfully, God wants to meet us wherever we are in life and in the depths of our struggles. We need to be continually formed, or really transformed, into the likeness of Jesus Christ.3 This is spiritual formation, a practice forged in response to the urgent need to attend to spiritual growth in modern day Christianity. Spiritual formation is about our continuing response to God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s conforming power into Christ’s likeness. Spiritual formation helps transform the natural expression of our hearts to become that of Christ’s deeds and God’s redemptive purposes. While intellect and reason may illuminate profound theological insights, it is the engaged heart that discovers and experiences the things of God. Paul wrote, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love may have power...may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19). Spiritual formation should be a culture of our hearts. Seminaries and churches throughout the nation are launching a trend of programs and movements in spiritual formation. The need for spiritual formation for ministry leaders is such a growing area that degree programs are now being offered in it. However, the intersection between spiritual formation and healthcare is a field that is still largely in its embryonic stage of development. Regardless, what can we learn from core disciplines in spiritual formation that can speak into the specific needs of healthcare professionals today? As a preface to spiritual formation, I have highlighted three essential spiritual disciplines and their applications for the healthcare professional.

**DISCIPLINE 1: POWER THROUGH SCRIPTURE AND MEDITATION**

Perhaps one of the most challenging seasons in my life was when I first started my residency training. A new city, a different environment and the demands of internship brought a radical shift to life. In an attempt to escape the pressures of the hospital for the first six months of residency, I used to drive out of the city deep into the mountains and read Scripture beneath the beautiful expanse of the starry hosts. It can be tough for the busy clinician to dive into Scripture with limited time, but it is an absolutely vital discipline that keeps us grounded and aligned with God’s truths. Knowledge of Scripture cultivates a foundation for all other spiritual disciplines. It forms the authority of our declaration to be a hand of mercy to the sick, as well as our response to the humanitarian need for the opposition of silence in situations of human crisis. It is a potent power to bring restoration, healing, and comfort. Scripture directs our path to repentance, a practice that not only begins our relationship with God but also deepens it. To meditate over Scripture is to allow the possibility of a God-inspired movement in our lives illuminated by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to better serve Him through some of the most perplexing challenges we face in healthcare and life, for that matter. To know Scripture is to forge a new friendship for the healthcare professional.



**DISCIPLINE 2: DEVOTED TO PRAYER AND PRACTICING SOLITUDE**

I remember a particularly busy season during my residency training while working long hours on call on the medical floors and ICUs. One such evening while on call, I prayed that God would validate His Father’s love for me, for which Jesus paid such a high price. I had learned that such a prayer could bring a wave of encouragement during the demands of caring for the sick.4, 5 So on my way down to the hospital cafeteria, a gentleman I never met before came up to me and asked if he could share something. “Sure,” I responded, with an air of skepticism. He introduced himself and said, “I feel that God wants to say to you that He knows where you are in this season of your life, and where you are is where He wants you to be and He loves you!” I was blown away! Something in me lifted, and a renewed strength poured over me in a wave of the Holy Spirit. Prayer often begins in the flesh, but it ends with the Holy Spirit that can intervene in any life circumstance or condition of the human heart. God can invade our circumstances in every situation when we devote time in communion with Him through prayer and solitude.6 Our constant interaction around people, death and dying in healthcare can accrue corrosion to our souls if we are not constantly rejuvenated by Christ.7, 8 In a place of prayer and solitude with Jesus, we find that inner sanctuary and experience the hands of God, stitching us up where we are wounded, restoring and redeeming that which was once lost. When we spend time with Jesus, courage and boldness grow in us. Jesus Himself responded to service, hardship, and oppression away from people and being alone with God (Matthew 26:36-44). And some-times, in the midst of our greatest pains with no one but Christ to accompany us in the wilderness, He can bring about the deepest transformation in our lives. Perhaps one of the greatest paradoxical tragedies we can inflict upon ourselves is to allow our Christ-oriented service to our patients steal away our time from Christ Himself.9 This would be a sweeping failure in our personal soul care. I believe God wants us to let His love have authority in our hearts so we can be empowered to reach His people. Our Christ-ordained service in healthcare is not a charity, nor is it solely a humanitarian responsibility as members of a civil society. It is an authority and the divine power of Christ flowing through us so we can help connect people to a God who loves them. For some of us, the biggest problem stunting our growth and connectedness with Christ is another authority other than Jesus, such as entertainment or even our careers itself. Communion with God, to ponder His Word and to welcome the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, allows us to rid ourselves from these other authorities. Only then can we fully translate the culture of heaven and the heart of the Father to those who are sick that we care for, and these are people who really need to understand His goodness.10

**DISCIPLINE 3: GOD-APPOINTED MENTORS AND FRIENDSHIPS**

To have God-appointed Christian mentors at each stage of our careers in healthcare is to be a recipient of blessing on a pathway of wisdom. My Ph.D. advisor played a significant influence in my walk with Jesus. He was a prominent academic nephrologist in England who deeply loves God. The first question he ever asked me during our first advisory meeting was who I thought Jesus was to me. Our subsequent meetings for the next few years were filled with a mixture of encouraging and exciting talks about Jesus, the Bible, science and medicine, plus, and most importantly, times of prayer together. As our extended collaborative team grew, others in our research group came to know Jesus as well. The brotherhood forged in our research team has been an incredible blessing, and while the Lord has taken us on different paths, we continue to meet up and pray for each other to this very day. Having God-appointed Christian mentors who are walking the path of trusting Jesus and who can remind us of our original design in Christ when times get challenging is a priceless, life-giving treasure. And there is no trade-off to the blessing that comes from a teachable heart in a mentoring relationship. In every new chapter of my life, I have found myself praying for God-appointed mentors as well as God-appointed friendships. God loves to play the guide in our relationships, and He brings to us the people we need in any particular season of life. Anointed mentors and anointed friendships are people who will dig a hole in a roof for you just so you can be near to Jesus (Mark 2:1-12). They help us protect our relationship with God and inter-cede for us in prayer when we find it difficult too. They are an integral part of our spiritual formation, as a significant part of our identity is belonging to the body of Christ. Authentic community always leads to Jesus.



**OTHER SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

I love to sing songs of worship. After a busy day on call, I find worship to be rejuvenating and restoring. At its core, when we worship we tell God how good He is, and His presence never fails to inhabit a place of worship (Psalm 22:3).11 Worship becomes a powerful force, allowing the ministerial work of the Holy Spirit to move when it be-comes the constant undertone in our lives.12 A discussion of other spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and attending to our emotions, in the context of the healthcare profession is beyond the scope of this article, though they are pivotal to include in our prescription for spiritual formation.

I shall leave you with these final words: God is the author of your story. We are called to be faithful to the calling God has for us, whether that is in doctoring, dentistry, nursing, or any other type of healthcare profession. But in order to live out the full calling He has for us, we must examine our hearts and walk a path of spiritual growth and wholeness in Christ that is by no means passive.13 Conforming to Christ’s likeness requires the same intensity and devotion, if not more, to the devotion and huge sacrifices many of us have placed to a career in healthcare. The opposition of grace is not effort, it is earning. And neither is a spiritual discipline a restriction, rather it is a weapon in the fight against spiritual slavery and emotional paralysis. God wants to transform you from one glory to another, and He wants to meet you more than you could ever want to meet Him. In fact, He broke through the heavens to meet us just where we are. In the process of our spiritual formation, God rescues us from many of our bankrupt philosophies of life so that our ultimate treasure becomes Jesus Christ. Our identity and singular legacy in Christ then become evident. What discipline in your spiritual formation is God calling you to develop in this season? Wherever you are in life, whether you are walking through a dark season, battling through the woes of medical school, residency or fellowship, engaging in the political strife as an attending or facing the uphill struggle for academic grant funding, remember this—God has never once forgotten you! He is intimately acquainted with every one of your needs. Jesus left us the Holy Spirit, and conviction from the Holy Spirit always leads us back to the Father’s arms of embrace. So often we are waiting on God, but God is actually waiting on us.

***CONTRIBUTORS AND REVIEWERS***

* Rev. Dr. Raymond Pendleton, Ph.D., MA, is Senior Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling and Director of the Clinical Counseling Program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts.
* Rev. Nicholas Fatato is Executive Director of Minister Development at Southern New England Ministry Network of the Assemblies of God and Member of the Executive Board of Trustees at Northpoint Bible College, Massachusetts.
* Rev. Dr. Thomas Pfizenmaier is Dean of the Hamilton Campus, Director of the Center for Formation and Leadership Development and Associate Professor of Formation and Leadership Development at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts.
* Rev. Peter Mehlrose was previously Director of Global Impact and Member of the Board of Trustees at Anchor Church, Boston, Massachusetts. Together with Dr. Lim, he co-founded a new church plant in Nashville, Tennessee where he serves as Lead Pastor.
* Rev. Dr. Randal Quackenbush is Lead Pastor of Anchor Church, Boston, Massachusetts, Adjunct Faculty at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Music and Worship Divisional Chair at Northpoint Bible College, Massachusetts.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Sifferlin, A. (2014, July 21). Burnout in the Hospital: Why Doctors Are Set Up for Stress. Retrieved May 22, 2018, from http://time.com/3004782/ burnout-in-the-hospital-why-doctors-are-set-up-for-stress/.
2. Willard, D. Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done. Retrieved May 22, 2018, from <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done>.
3. Gangel, K. O., & Wilhoit, J. C. (Eds.). (1997). The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
4. Chan, F., & Yankoski, D. (2015). Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.
5. Lynch, J., McNicol, B., & Thrall, B. (2011). The Cure: What if God isn’t who you think He is, and neither are you? Phoenix, AZ: Trueface.
6. Batterson, M. (2011). The Circle Maker: Praying Circles Around Your Big- gest Dreams and Greatest Fears. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
7. Willard, D. (1998). Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation, and the Restoration of the Soul. Journal of Psychology and Theology, 26(1), 101-109. doi:10.1177/009164719802600108.
8. Ortberg, J. (2014). Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
9. Wiseman, N., Willimon, W., et al. (2002). The Pastor’s Guide to Effective Ministry. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City.
10. Bolz, S. (2015). Translating God: Hearing God’s Voice for Yourself and The World Around You. Glendale, CA: ICreate Productions.
11. Piper, J. (2011). Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist. CO Springs, CO: Multnomah Books.
12. Wiseman, N., Willimon, W., et al. (2002). The Pastor’s Guide to Effective Ministry. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City.
13. Willard, D. (2001, April 14) Live Life to the Full. Christian Herald (UK).

**KENNETH LIM, MD, Ph.D., MPhil, FASN**, is a physician-scientist, strategist, and entrepreneur. He is Attending Physician at the Division of Nephrology, Massachusetts General Hospital and Faculty Member at Harvard Medical School. He is affiliated with the Division of Experimental Medicine and Immuno-therapeutics (EMIT) at the University of Cambridge, England. He is CEO of Kairos Vision Group, a private investment firm, and CEO of Sygnm North America, a digital currency asset management corporation. He serves on the board of directors of several Christian non-profit organizations and has been a strategist for companies, churches, and non-profits in diverse areas from healthcare and international humanitarian projects to television and film production. He has published extensively and has been contributing author for Oxford University Press, Springer Publishers, and Elsevier Publishing Company. He is the recipient of many awards including an NIH Career Development Award, an NIH Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award, the Medical Research Foundation Early Clinical Investigator Award, and the distinguished Genzyme-Sanofi Fellowship Award at Harvard University. He was previously the CMDA Massachusetts State Representative.