

Renowned physician, global health care activist Paul Farmer dies at 62

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue



(Courtesy of Partners in Health)

World-renowned physician and medical anthropologist Paul Farmer died of an acute cardiac event in his sleep on February 21. He was 62.

Farmer, who is credited with helping to improve health-care equity around the globe, was deeply influenced by his Catholic faith and by liberation theology in particular. He maintained a close friendship with Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian Catholic priest credited with creating liberation theology, and carried a “preferential option for the poor”—a core liberation theology concept—into all of his work, even at secular institutions.

In a 1995 essay for *America* magazine, Farmer wrote that liberation theology provides both a challenge and an insight for medical professionals.

“It challenges doctors and other health providers to make an option for the poor by working on their behalf,” he wrote. “The insight is, in a sense, an epidemiological one: most often, diseases themselves make a preferential option for the poor. That is, the poor are sicker than the non-poor. They are at heightened risk of dying prematurely, whether from increased exposure to pathogens (including pathogenic situations) or from decreased access to services or, as is most often the case, from both of these ‘risk factors.’”

Farmer began his medical career in 1983 in Haiti. After seeing how people with low incomes were routinely barred from high-quality medical care, in 1987 Farmer helped found Partners in Health—a nonprofit that he hoped would bring cutting-edge medical resources to established, local health-care providers in low-income communities.

That attention to local autonomy is one of the hallmarks of Partners in Health’s work: according to the organization, of the 18,000 people they employ, 99 percent are from the countries in which they work. The group’s work has been effective in shaping public health policies related to tuberculosis, HIV, and Ebola around the world, especially in Haiti and Rwanda.

In a tweet on the day of Farmer’s death, Rwandan president Paul Kagame said it was difficult to express the level of his sadness.

“The weight of his loss is in many ways personal, to the country of Rwanda (which he loved and to which he contributed so much during its reconstruction), to my family and to myself. I know there are many who feel this way in Africa and beyond.”