

Doctors of the soul: Bedside prayers

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

I have long envied the white coats that physicians wear in hospitals; they're simple, no nonsense and authoritative. Drape a stethoscope around the neck and the coat is perfectly accessorized.

To me, the coat says, "Trust me. I know what I'm doing. I just came from the lab where I was working on something that may win a Nobel Prize. Since my skills are in such demand, I didn't have time to take off this lab coat before rushing over here to talk to you about your gall bladder."

OK, maybe it doesn't say all of that to everyone, and my words probably aren't what doctors want to convey about themselves. But the uniform does suggest years of hard training, earned respect and—best of all—a sense of belonging. When a white coat walks into a waiting room, conversations stop and everyone looks up.

In spite of my envy, I could never muster any interest in science, so medical school was out. But I've never given up the yearning to walk into a room with the good news that people were hoping to hear.

Early in my ministry I was so intimidated by medical professionals that I dreaded making hospital calls. It wasn't that I didn't want to hang around sick people. It was that I fretted I was in the way of the pros who had serious healing to do. As a pastor I had no bag filled with manna-like pills, I couldn't make sense of the beeping machines hovering like techno-angels over the hospital beds, and I had no ability or authority to take anyone's vital signs. I would walk into the midst of all that science armed with only a prayer, and I doubted that this qualified as vital. The best affirmation I received was "That was a nice prayer," but nice isn't vital either. My visits were short so that I could get out of the way of the people who could really help.

It took a long time to get over an envy-intimidation cycle that prevented me from offering genuine pastoral care. As with much of my pastoral maturity over the years, it was my parishioners who helped me value my calling. I started to pay attention to

the disappointment in their eyes when I made excuses for leaving early. I tried listening when they attempted to poke through my restlessness by telling me about their fear. I was surprised when they introduced me to the white coat who interrupted our conversation. I was stunned and overwhelmed when some of them would respond to my prayer with prayers of their own—thanking God for my visit.

Eventually I begin to appreciate what these parishioners had long known but didn't have the theological language to express: God is with us. I was discounting their "Thanks for the nice prayer" because it didn't sound sufficiently spiritual. But when I heard my parishioners respond, "Thank you, Doctor. It was nice of you to stop by," I realized that they didn't have medical language either. What they had was years and years of training to be affirming. Their cultured politeness was a thin veneer over a deep hope that God was involved—in both medicine and prayer.

My hospital calling was also transformed by my visits to those in hospice—a place that typically has dedicated nurses but few white coats. It's a place you go when the medical doctors have done all they can. Again my parishioners helped me see that they still needed me to pray for the healing of their broken souls so they could die in peace. They needed me, not a healer but a doctor of the soul, someone who is clearly on speaking terms with the Savior. That is why they expect me to pray.

When we pastors pray for sick parishioners, our prayers become the axis mundi that connects heaven and earth. Prayer is a means of communion with the God who created us, sustains us and leads us to a future filled with hope. It places both body and soul into the hands of this God, which are the only hands that truly heal. Why would I want to exchange that for a white coat?

These days, 30 years after ordination, I walk into the hospital room as if I were processing down the center aisle on Sunday morning. That's because I eventually realized that I'm still leading worship. I suppose I could wear my Geneva gown in an effort to compete with the white coats, but that would only expose the vestiges of my insecurity. My parishioners know I'm a representative of their worshipping community. Although they'd feel clumsy expressing it, their souls also know that I was ordained to carry on a sacred conversation between them and God, and they're grateful that my nice prayers bring a witness to the profound presence of Jesus Christ in that hospital room.

I'm also grateful. I have learned much about Jesus that only my sick parishioners could have taught me. As the Gospels proclaim, he has a passion for the sick and dying. When my prayers make room for silence, I too witness his presence.

The restless yearning to get out of the way doesn't plague me anymore. That's a blessing for my parishioners as well as for me. I visit hospitals with a conviction that I too belong there, because I have Good News for those waiting in a hospital bed. I've come to pray.