

# HEALING THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDICINE

HOW ORAL ROBERTS' HEALING VISION WAS—  
AND CONTINUES TO BE—FULFILLED

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*Spiritus* 4.2 (2019) 191–203

<http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/>

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**Keywords** *healing, prayer, medicine, City of Faith, Family Medical Residency, Oral Roberts University*

## Abstract

This article is a personal reflection on the legacy of integration of divine healing with medical practice through the vision of the Oral Roberts University School of Medicine. It charts the origins of the School of Medicine, the implementation of the philosophy of prayer and medicine, and the legacy that followed the theology and faculty after the school closed in 1989.

## Introduction

In February 1976, Oral Roberts announced to the faculty and students of Oral Roberts University (ORU), “God has spoken to me again.”<sup>1</sup> These were familiar words to those who had been with Roberts through every significant point in his ministry. In 1935, God had supernaturally healed Oral Roberts of tuberculosis and gave him the commission to build a university. In 1947, God spoke to him to take his healing power to his generation through the revelation in 3 John 2 that salvation is for the spirit,

soul, and body. In 1961, God spoke again and told Roberts to “[b]uild me a university on the Holy Spirit” in order to raise up students to continue and exceed his work of bringing healing to the uttermost bounds of the earth. But on this day in 1976, Roberts announced that God was saying that it was time to merge healing prayer with medicine. God said,

Build me a medical school at Oral Roberts University. I want a stream of my healing power to constantly flow out of ORU through prayer and medical science as well. I want you to raise up Christian doctors who will accept my healing power in its fullness. They will do all they can through prayer, and they will do all they can through medicine.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of merging divine healing with medical healing was something that was on Roberts’ heart for many years. During his crusade ministry, Roberts reminded attendees of his healing campaigns regularly that he fully believed in the medical profession and encouraged those who were healed to visit their doctors to confirm their healing. Later, when preparing to build the university in 1962, Roberts had become friends with a medical doctor named William Standish Reed. Reed, a former chief surgeon in Michigan, was an Anglican believer who had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had founded an association of Christian doctors (Christian Medical Foundation) that promoted the holistic concept of medicine to include healing in body, mind, and spirit.<sup>3</sup> Reed recognized that for too long the church and the medical profession had been at odds. He believed that the outpouring of the Spirit was not only for the healing of the church, but to heal the divorce between physical healing and medical healing. Reed remarks,

Let us find a few people in the practice of medicine who believe in the Holy Spirit—people who will pray along in their own operating rooms, “Make me thy intern, O Lord Jesus!” knowing that God Almighty is there working with them. And when nurses come to care for their patients, let there be nothing but Christ’s

love manifesting itself in the treatment of each and every individual patient.<sup>4</sup>

Reed's interest in salvation as a whole person experience resonated with Roberts' belief that salvation was just as much physical as it was spiritual. Reed's influence stirred in Roberts the desire one day to use the university to raise up doctors as vessels of divine healing through prayer and medicine. Unlike some in Pentecostal circles who believed that prayer and medicine were in conflict with one another, Roberts believed medicine and prayer were simply two different delivery systems for God's healing.<sup>5</sup> Roberts comments, "God's different delivery systems—prayer, medicine, rest, exercise, love and understanding—are combined as a part of God's good which he uses for healing."<sup>6</sup>

## **An Idea Is Born**

My journey to Oral Roberts University began when I had heard that Oral Roberts had intended to start a school of medicine. In the early 1970s, I seemed to be on a "fast track" towards a successful career in medicine. I was the residency director of one of the original and largest family medicine programs in the U.S. I had an academic appointment with UCLA School of Medicine. I was being offered increased salary, advancement in my academic appointment, and promised additional positions. But, as it turned out, one of the students in my Sunday School class put me on the mailing list of Oral Roberts' *Abundant Life Magazine* as a joke. I was not a fan of Oral Roberts and threw away each issue. Finally, a particular issue arrived announcing that Oral Roberts was going to begin a medical school at ORU.

My first response was, "He is crazy!" I must admit, I agonized over this. I knew that if Roberts and his medical leadership team were going to do it right, they would need to develop a family medicine residency program as well. I wrote a rather obnoxious letter to Oral Roberts and said, "If you are serious about starting a medical school and with an emphasis on medical missions, you need to know that family medicine will be an

important future emphasis!” But I wanted also to make it clear I was not interested in joining them. I closed the letter with, “I don’t care for the Oral Roberts Ministry and hope I never hear any more from you. Good bye and good luck!” Feeling as if I had done my part, I immediately hoped God would leave me alone. But, it was not long before the pull towards joining ORU would not go away and the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart and said, “This is where you are going!” Over the next few months, I had several communications with Dr. James Winslow, the acting Dean of the medical school, about ORU’s Family Medicine Department. This began my consideration of coming to ORU to see if the idea of merging faith and medicine was possible.

The dream of a Christian family medical residency program that integrated faith and medicine started to come into focus at a Family Medicine Education Conference in Kansas City in 1978. One of the attendees was Sydney Garrett, the newly appointed chairman of Family Medicine at the New ORU School of Medicine (SOM)! At dinner one night with Sydney Garrett, Warren Heffron, and George Sims we discussed for three hours the potential of ORU SOM to realize the dream of a medical school and a family medicine residency program inspired by Oral Roberts’ vision of integrating faith and medicine. During that time we wrestled with four questions that would change the story of my life:

- Could whole person medicine include the spiritual dimension?
- Could one integrate Christian faith in the practice of medicine in an ethical manner?
- Could one teach that to medical students/residents who are of a similar persuasion?
- Could that prompt and empower outreach to underserved populations in the US and around the world?

These orienting questions were radical for the medical profession in the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on the bio-psychosocial model of

clinical care. This model takes into account the mental, physical, and socio-cultural factors that affect diagnosis and care of patients, but ignored the spiritual factors that affect a person's health. Oral Roberts recognized this gap and believed that doctors who were filled with the Spirit could be equipped by God to address the spiritual side of health care. This resonated with doctors like me who recognized that the current approach tended not only to dismiss the spirituality of the patient, but also forced doctors like me to ignore my own faith in how I practiced medicine. The vision of ORU to merge healing and medicine meant that doctors could not only practice medicine in a Christian environment, but that doctors and patients could integrate their faith into diagnosis, treatment, and medical outcomes. This idea was the dominate idea that attracted some of us, who were trying to figure this out, to consider joining ORU. By the end of the meeting we realized we had stumbled on an opportunity to do something that no other medical school had done: integrate medicine and faith that recognized the whole person that Oral Roberts was emphasizing at ORU.

Meanwhile, in 1977, construction on the campus of ORU began to add an additional 440,000 square feet to the Graduate Center to house the graduate programs spurred on by the medical, nursing, and other graduate schools. Oral Roberts announced that the SOM would not just be educating Christian doctors; it would be advancing medical breakthroughs including the effort to fund research to cure cancer. He announced, "While I will always pray for the sick, which includes the healing of people with cancer, I believe with all my being that God intends for there to be medical breakthroughs in cancer research."<sup>7</sup> But it was the announcement in November of 1978 that shocked the medical community when he unveiled his plan to build a three-tower hospital called the City of Faith Medical Center and Research Complex. In front of the City of Faith would be a giant statue of "healing hands" in which the one hand of medicine is merged with the hand of healing prayer.

The momentum for the dream of a Christian family medical residency began to be realized when I joined the faculty of ORU SOM in the fall of

1978. The school was set to open in December of 1978. Many other basic science faculty were already in place, such as professors of biology and anatomy, but I was about the first of the clinical faculty hired and purposed to establish the residency program. The Holy Spirit called many faculty who were drawn to Oral Roberts' dream of merging prayer and medicine, as I was, to come to ORU. We all had one thing in common: we wanted to make a difference, to bring into the medical profession the dimension of faith that we were unable to do in a secular environment. But more than that, we wanted the university to be a place where we could replicate the vision of faith and medicine in medical students and residents who could go into "every person's world." The family medicine residency program began in 1980 and soon after that, the City of Faith Medical and Research Center was opened in 1981.

The ORU SOM was established on the highest of academic principles. But unlike secular programs, our approach was very different. The professors were some of the best in their fields, but all of them shared the mission to help students learn the best and latest techniques in an environment of encouragement rather than the cutthroat environment of most programs. Our medical students and residents fared very well when they would do rotations away from the City of Faith. Often we would get evaluation reports where the hospitals indicated that they did not know what to expect from ORU students, but were surprised to find out how skilled and excellent ORU medical students and residents were.

Beyond the academic rigor, the SOM also had several unique missional characteristics modeled after Roberts' vision for the university. First, Roberts introduced the idea that doctors should be instruments of world evangelization and healing. Roberts believed that "healing teams" should consist of more than simply evangelists, but there should be a team of professionals from various disciplines—such as medicine, education, business, law, and theology—to minister to the needs of the whole person.<sup>8</sup>

Roberts' vision was that the ORU SOM would be a medical missionary training school that would provide scholarships for medical

students so they would go to the nations. He knew that the cost of medical school prohibited doctors from engaging in missions. He said,

God's instructions were for me to raise the \$8 million it will take to give full scholarships to each of our young physicians-in-training, including their room and board. This way, when they finish their residencies they will not have to go into practice here in America, where there is already a surplus of doctors, to pay off heavy educational debts before they can go to the mission field.<sup>9</sup>

The decision to fund fully the medical students came at a cost of \$45,000 per year per student, which was about \$8,000,000 per year. Roberts would endeavor to raise this massive investment of capital through his partners. However, this idea proved to be too big of a financial commitment.

From 1985–1989, the financial situation worsened and controversy began to surface over Roberts' attempts to raise needed funds to sustain the program and the City of Faith. In July 1986, Roberts' financial problems came to a head and he announced that God was displeased with him for failing to send out healing teams to touch the world with God's healing power.<sup>10</sup> Roberts felt his pleas for donations were necessary because of the drop in donations due to the scandals by several popular televangelists. By March 1987, Roberts' financial needs for the SOM and City of Faith had reached a crisis. He announced that he needed \$1.5 million dollars by the end of the month or he would have to close the school. He also uttered the infamous promise that if he was not obedient to fulfill God's plan to raise up missionary doctors, that God would "call him home."<sup>11</sup> That announcement proved to be the death knell of the dream to merge prayer and medicine through the ORU SOM and the City of Faith. Two years later, in 1989, the SOM and City of Faith were closed. Students and residents already enrolled were forced to transfer to other medical schools and residency programs and faculty had to pursue other employment. Despite the extreme disappointment and enormous difficulties this action

caused for many of the students, residents, and faculty, many students were able to transfer to other medical schools and programs, performing very well, with many achieving honors in those places.

## **The Legacy Lives On**

When the announcement came that the school and hospital would be closing, I was the Acting Chairman of the Family Medicine Department. We were then faced with a choice. Would we give up on the dream of a Christian family medical residency program? Or was the idea bigger than the ORU SOM and the City of Faith? I called together our faculty and current residents in Family Medicine and asked them if they believed the idea was bigger than ORU and the City of Faith. I asked them to take the weekend to pray about continuing the residency program on our own. I suggested that they consult with their spouses, their spiritual elders, and if they felt they should, to fast and come Monday morning ready to give their answer. To a person, every faculty member said yes, they believed in this vision of combining faith and medicine and believed we should find a way to continue. It was in that moment that we decided that the vision to bring healing through medicine should outlast the ORU SOM and City of Faith. Continually inspired by Oral Roberts' vision of merging prayer and medicine, we determined to move forward.

We were advised by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, the accreditation body for medical residency programs, that we would need to find a new "parent hospital" and a new sponsoring institution (and for us, one that was amenable with the Christian spiritual integration). Surprisingly, the local hospital that was most receptive and interested was perhaps the most secular one in town. To place such a family medicine program in a public domain non-profit hospital required that we form a religious and educational non-profit organization so that we could contract with the hospital to run such a program. That would give them (a secular non-profit hospital) a contract "arms-length relationship" from the spiritual aims and methods of our program!



Therefore In His Image, Inc., (IHI) was founded to “improve health and meet spiritual needs” based on the following charter goals:

1. Training Christian physicians in our family medicine residency program;
2. Participating in worldwide medical missions and medical education, particularly through the graduates and faculty of our program;
3. Serving the local underserved populations in the greater Tulsa area.

With that accomplished, within just a few weeks we were able to secure a relationship with Hillcrest Hospital for the residency program. What began as the death of a dream turned around and is now a fully accredited and reputed high quality family medical residency that is leading the way in merging faith and medicine.

The main goal of IHI was and is to produce physicians who thoroughly integrate their spiritual faith in the practice of medicine and medical education. We turn to God for answers, rely on his strength, when sorting out difficult medical problems and when delivering difficult news, and we thank him openly for miracles he performs in our patients. We, as residents, graduates, and physicians, do that unashamedly and use it to evangelize our patients and/or our colleagues where we can do it ethically and appropriately. IHI takes medical care and the love of God to the far reaches of our hurting world. In His Image, International, (IHII) short-term overseas outreaches include free clinics, disaster and crisis response, orphanage ministry, evangelistic retreats, and a special emphasis on medical education through medical conferences and consultations in the development of family medicine residencies and primary care health systems. So all of these are means by which we are intentional in training medical missionaries like Oral Roberts envisioned! Currently more than twenty-five of our IHI graduates are full time medical missionaries around the world, and more than half are in the 1040 Window! IHI never intended

to develop a “sending agency,” but a number of our graduates wanted to do medical education missions and often could not find a sending agency that would encourage them to do that full time. So now we have fourteen families for whom IHII is the sending agency and more come on board regularly.

The ministry to the underserved in our own community is now under a separate 501-C-3 non-profit, Good Samaritan Health Services, a mobile medical van outreach to those in the greater Tulsa area who have almost no access to health care except the emergency room. God has provided (with some very generous Christian donors and the support of our hospital, St. John Medical Center’s foundation) three mobile medical vans that provide thousands of patient care visits per year at approximately fourteen different sites and with approximately fifty clinics per month, and it is growing!

I believe we can say that God is faithful in fulfilling Oral Roberts’ healing vision, at least in part, through this remnant of the ORU SOM and the City of Faith.

## **Where Are They Now?**

The graduates of ORU SOM and the IHI family medicine residency have also continued to live out the vision of healing through medicine. There are way too many to start naming them and we would leave out some very significant contributors. Just recently I was able to attend the workshop at a medical mission conference where Dr. Allen Sawyer, an Ob-Gyn doctor from the ORU SOM days, was teaching how to be effective in short term medical missions. He has done multiple mission trips through the years and now is winding down his practice to do even more! Dr. Bill McCoy, the very first graduate of the ORU Family Medicine Residency, became the quintessential medical missionary who lived out this vision, serving overseas for thirty-five years!

Dr. Mark Babo, an ORU SOM graduate and a graduate of the ORU Family Medicine Residency, and his wife Dr. Doreen Babo, a PhD expert in

administration of medical mission hospitals, have started and nationalized several medical mission hospitals in Nigeria and now in other places.

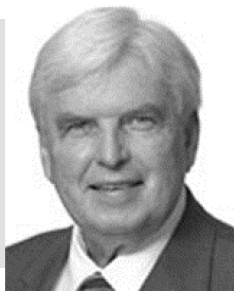
As we have mentioned, a number of our graduates and some of the ORU SOM graduates have chosen to go to the 1040 Window, often to the “closed” or “creative access” countries, places where ordinary missionaries are not allowed to go. And they are having an impact in those places. We have graduates in challenging places like the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, Africa, and South America.

Some of the ORU faculty and graduates moved on to become some of the leading doctors in their fields. Dr. Milton Olsen, who was the primary recruiter for the SOM, went to University of Oklahoma-Tulsa School of Medicine where he became recognized for his wholeness approach to medicine. He was honored to have named after him the Milt Olsen Award for outstanding students who excelled in treating the whole person. Dr. Sydney Garrett, former Chairman of the Department of Family Medicine and then subsequently Dean of the ORU SOM, went on to become a medical education missionary to the Middle East. George Sims, Chairman of the Family Medicine Department, went on to study medical ethics at Harvard and taught and did administration in the Department of Family Medicine at Penn State University. Warren Heffron, who has been Chairman of the Family Medicine Department at the University of New Mexico and President of the Christian Medical and Dental Associations, has joined with us at IHI as adjunct faculty and now serves as the Chairman of the Board of our IHII international outreach program. Dr. Heffron has been the President of the American Board of Family Practice, which certifies all family physicians. He was the North American representative to the world conference of family practice doctors.

## **Conclusion**

So where are we with this dream of “healing through faith and medicine,” a vision that President Oral Roberts cast so long ago? Perhaps the ORU SOM and City of Faith are gone in a temporal sense, but the principles upon

which they were founded live on in our hearts and dreams and in the vision and accomplishments of so many graduates from the ORU SOM and the family medicine residency. The loss of those temporal manifestations of Oral Roberts' vision does not diminish the incredible idea that the hand of medicine and the hand of prayer/faith can come together to produce true whole person medicine and healing for the whole person. For our part at In His Image, we honor Oral Roberts for hearing from God and casting that vision that continues to inspire and motivate us to take the Gospel around our community, around the U.S., and around the world, where God's voice is heard small.



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## Note

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the issue editor, Daniel Isgrigg, for his assistance with transforming this talk delivered at the 2015 Healing Gospel Conference at Oral Roberts University and for the historical details for this section.

<sup>2</sup> *Abundant Life*, February 1976, 7.

<sup>3</sup> William S. Reed, "We Must Save the Sick to Save Souls," *Abundant Life*, February 1961, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Reed, "We Must Save the Sick to Save Souls," 9.

<sup>5</sup> Vinson Synan, "The Pentecostal Roots of Oral Roberts' Healing Ministry," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 3:2 (2018), 287–302.

<sup>6</sup> *Abundant Life*, February 1976, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Oral Roberts, “I Believe the Cure for Cancer Has a Spiritual Origin,” *Abundant Life*, January 1977, 3.

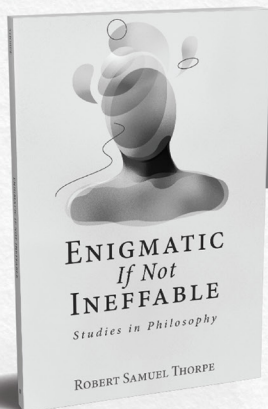
<sup>8</sup> Kevin Schneider, “A History of ORU Healing Teams,” *Spiritus* 3:2 (2018), 221–38.

<sup>9</sup> Oral Roberts, “God Says: It’s Action Time,” *Abundant Life*, March-April 1987, 2–5.

<sup>10</sup> Oral Roberts, “God’s Mandate for Change in Healing and Missions . . . Now!” *Abundant Life*, July 1986, 3–7.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, “God Says: It’s Action Time,” 3.

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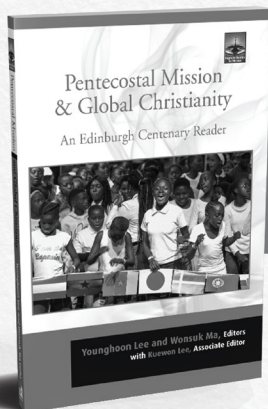
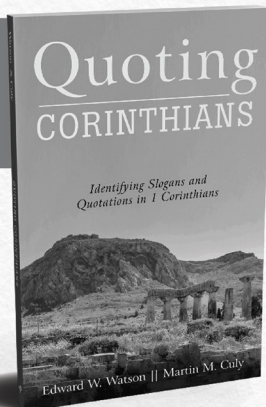
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