



Perched on the edge of Charlene's bed, Dr. Chris Peoples sings a mixture of traditional hymns and modern worship songs while Charlene waits for her daughter to come visit.



By Ross McCall  
Photographs by Guy Gerrard

## NO SIDE EFFECTS

**DR. CHRIS PEOPLES**  
INTERTWINES MUSIC  
AND MEDICINE IN MEMPHIS.

**IN ROOM 548** of a Memphis, Tennessee, hospital, Charlene recovers from a heart attack and kidney failure. Her doctor enters the room and takes a large, khaki-colored bag off his shoulders, placing it next to her bed.

“Do you remember me?” asks Dr. Chris Peoples.

“Yes, sir,” replies Charlene.

“Do you remember I had to put a tube down your throat?” asks Chris.

“Yes, sir; my throat is still a little sore,” Charlene replies, smiling warmly at the 29-year-old doctor. Chris smiles back as though he’s bursting to share good news. He takes time to carefully explain the progress Charlene has made so far. She had been in danger of dying on the day he first saw her.

He removes the stethoscope from around his neck, reviews Charlene’s medical notes, performs his regular checks and listens to Charlene’s heartbeat. “Do you know our God heals through music?” he asks. “Our God is amazing.” CONTINUED ON PAGE 28



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Charlene nods.

“I had an idea for your throat,” Chris says. “We should thank God for what He’s done.”

Chris reaches to the floor and lifts a guitar from the khaki bag. Sitting on the edge of Charlene’s bed, he asks what they sang last time. She’s unsure, but continues smiling as he holds the elderly woman’s hand.

Chris begins gently singing, his voice fragile, pushing each note past his vocal chords. Charlene tries to sing despite her throat pain before giving up, happy just to listen to a doctor she obviously likes.

“What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus,” sings the doctor, as though sharing a positive prognosis.

Chris asks if he can pray. “There’s no God like You,” he prays. “Life and death are in Your hands. Plenty of people pass, but You are healing here.” The sincerity of his optimism for Charlene invades the atmosphere. She

chooses to sit up in her bed now.

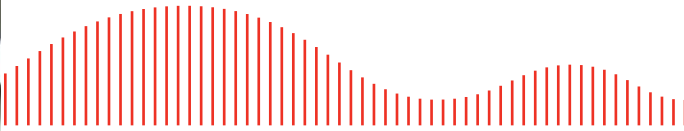
He places the guitar back in its bag, straps it over his white coat and tells Charlene, “I’ll see you soon.”

Long before Chris was a doctor, he competed in triathlons in high school. He favored endurance events, describing himself as highly competitive until an injury forced him to miss a major championship, leaving him bitterly disappointed.

He battled disappointment again in medical school when he lost his voice completely for six weeks, and struggled to regain it for two years. He lives with the fear of it happening again. The cause remains unconfirmed.

Little else escapes Chris’ diagnosis. “His scores are off the charts,” says one of his residency supervisors. Chris focuses intense mental energy on understanding patients, and helping them to trust him during uncertain moments. His intellect is uncommonly paired with warmth.

Chris believes attention to underlying spiritual issues will radically advance physical healing. “God has much

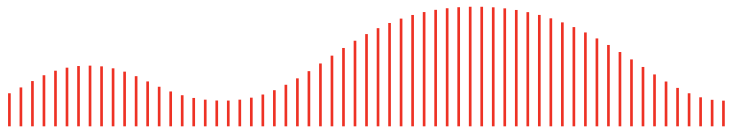


**“This has to be made known. This has to be brought into healing, into medicine.”**

—Dr. Chris Peoples

Christ Community Health Services residents and their supervisor discuss patients on the ward (left). Memphis is known for its musical landmarks, such as Sun Studios, where Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash recorded (right). Teenagers perform acrobatics on Beale Street (below).





**“We never had a singing doctor here before, but we don’t think he’s crazy. It seems like it helps.”**

—Kalen Joe, nurse

better medicine than we do,” he says. Spiritual healing has become the first order of business for this doctor, not an afterthought to science.

And so Chris belongs to a four-year program run by Christ Community Health Services in Memphis, where young doctors learn to address the spiritual health of patients, not just the physical. CCHS residents live in inner-city neighborhoods alongside many of their patients.

In a 2004 study of family-practice patients, the American Academy of Family Physicians discovered that 83 percent wanted physicians to ask about their spiritual beliefs in at least some circumstances. Only 9 percent of patients interviewed had ever received such an inquiry.

CCHS residents pray with patients and discuss their spiritual health, as part of providing the best medical



“To The Need, To The Nations, For The King” reads the sticker on Chris’ laptop (left). Chris invests time in mentoring Jerry Wood, an inner-city neighbor (below, left). Making kids like Oscar (right) smile is part of the doctor’s job.



care possible. Chris stretches the boundaries by wearing a guitar on his back throughout shifts, aiming to worship with his patients.

“It started with realizing that after 20 seconds of a worship song, I can go from feeling like giving up to being back in God’s arms, feeling joy I can’t describe,” says Chris. “If I’m a doctor and I’m receiving this kind of healing, then this has to be made known. This has to be brought into healing, into medicine.”

“Music is free and there are no side effects,” says Chris. He thinks Memphis, where Johnny Cash recorded songs loaded with pain, is the perfect setting to begin exploring the potential of worship music in spiritual health.

The sound of Chris singing *Amazing Grace* with a patient and her family fills the ward. Nurses work hard at looking as though nothing unusual is happening.

They trust his medical skills, but it’s the bedside manner of Chris and his CCHS colleagues they respect most. Kalen Joe, a nurse in the hospital for the past two years, says, “We never had a singing doctor here before, but we don’t think he’s crazy. It seems like it helps.”

In an environment where assessing patients, diagnosing conditions and prescribing treatments are what’s expected, Chris covers those bases while pointing patients to Jesus. His gentle vocal tone and relaxed demeanor belie the forcefulness of his convictions.

“Being in the hospital can feel like a battlefield,” says Chris. “It feels spiritually heavy because people are often dying there. Sometimes, it feels like we’re just holding off death until family members are ready to let the person go.” The atmosphere weighs on idealistic young doctors. Chris, with the lean appearance of a runner, pushes hard





Chris prays with the family of Willy White (above). Days in the CCHS pediatric clinic feel like a sprint to Chris. Working long shifts in the hospital, guitar strapped to his back, he enjoys more time connecting with patients (below).

against the darkness with his hope in Christ.

“Sometimes a patient arrives on our ward and we can’t see the problem, so we share the gospel with them in case that’s the only reason God brought them in,” says Chris. He recently prayed with a patient named Mack, who chose to become a Christian after a long conversation.

In two years, only two patients have rejected the invitation to sing. During his first year as a resident, one patient’s family deemed the singing unprofessional behavior. Chris was asked to hang up his guitar. Though it pained him, he submitted and the guitar stayed silent for six months.

Nathan Cook, spiritual director of CCHS, describes Chris’ struggle: “He believes it’s Christ alone that he’s accountable to, and that’s coming partly out of his youthful idealism. He needs to grow in recognizing the authorities that he’s under and submitting to those, even when they may be wrong. But he’s a humble guy.”

Chris’ faith began shaping his career in medical school when he joined the Medical Strategic Network, an affiliate ministry of Cru. He credits Bob Mason, a Cru



staff member, with teaching him how to talk about the gospel and pray with patients.

Bob recalls emailing Chris' group before a major exam, offering to postpone a meeting: "One by one the responses came back, 'I don't think I will make it, I'm behind with work.'"

Then Chris emailed his peers: "Dudes, if we start compromising now, where is it going to end?" One by one the students changed their minds. "We ended up spending three hours together," says Bob. "Chris showed leadership. Sometimes he pushed the others, often he placed an arm around them."

With one year of residency in Memphis remaining, Chris dreams of owning a family medicine practice among the poor and dispossessed, where he could explore spiritual health more fully. His vision is informed by the CCHS culture, which encourages forsaking the lucrative career path of specialized medicine in favor of family practice.

Nearing the end of a 30-hour shift, Chris completes rounds alongside three other residents and their supervisor. They visit Kevin (name changed for privacy reasons), a marijuana addict the same age as Chris. The supervisor recommends a treatment that involves Kevin staying off marijuana.

Kevin says, "I can't. I don't like who I am without it." The doctors leave the room, but Chris looks agitated.

"I need to go back in," he says, turning around and closing Kevin's door behind him.

"After 12 years here," says Chris' supervisor, "I've come to realize that medicine, like the gospel, is a commodity. You can offer it to people, but you can't make them take it." Looking toward Kevin's room he says, "Chris can't accept that yet."

Kevin tells Chris, "I need it to give me peace."

"I know somewhere else you can find peace," says Chris. As he talks about Jesus, Kevin closes off from him, but Chris wants him to visit a CCHS clinic during the week. Chris takes the guitar off his back, thinks for a moment, then begins singing.

"Teach me guitar and I'll come into your clinic," says Kevin.

He visits Chris three days later to discuss treatments and arrange for his guitar lesson. Chris wants Kevin to experience music as medicine. He wants him to worship. ■

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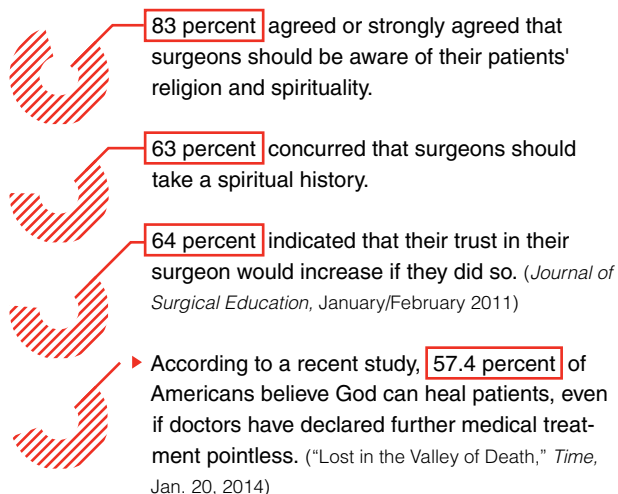
## TAKE AWAY

Dr. Chris Peoples says, "I'm a worshipper. That's who I am." What word would you choose to define yourself? How does that title shape the direction of your life?

# SPIRITUAL HEALTH AND MEDICINE

**A growing body of research and public opinion suggests that spiritual health deserves a greater focus among American doctors.**

▶ In a study of surgical patients:



- ▶ "Medicine breeds cynics. Medical school brainwashes you to think that people are numbers and that medicine is the most important thing in your life. In our clinics we begin each day by praying by name for all our patients." (Dr. John David Williamson, Christ Community Health Services)
- ▶ "More than 75 percent of U.S. medical schools have incorporated spirituality topics into the curricula. Only three medical schools offered similar courses in 1993." (*AAMC Reporter*, March 2014)
- ▶ "If they [doctors] don't know about their patients' spirituality, then they're practicing medicine without all of the information they need, because [spirituality] can influence the patient's prognosis and compliance." (Dr. Harold G. Koenig, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Duke University Medical Center, [www.abcnews.com](http://www.abcnews.com), Sep. 12, 2013)
- ▶ The Medical Strategic Network aims to connect with young doctors during their medical studies. By providing mentoring, training and relevant mission projects, doctors like Chris Peoples (see "No Side Effects," starting on page 26) learn to make Jesus part and parcel of the care they provide. In an environment where science is everything, the Medical Strategic Network (which partners with Cru) helps make faith an essential ingredient of effective medical practice. Learn more at [medsn.org](http://medsn.org). ■