

PURE RELIGION

The Hands of a Surgeon

Dr. Susan Puls is a woman who has always known what she wanted out of life. At nine years of age, for example, she knew she wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon.

A precocious child, she graduated from high school at 16, then attended college, where she received one degree in chemistry and then a second in physical therapy. After four years of medical school at Tulane University and five years of interning, Dr. Puls began practicing as an orthopedic surgeon in Florida when she was 31 years old.

Two years later—primarily due to the examples of a good friend she had known in medical school and a mentor and teacher who had guided her through her internship—she joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But even though her life was following the script she had written for herself, she had no way of knowing the twists that awaited. It began in her hands—a dull pain that began to grow ever more acute. Soon, she was experiencing soreness in other joints of her body. Being an orthopedic surgeon, she had a good idea of what was happening to her. She visited numerous specialists and sought their advice. She tried many things to alleviate the pain, but the debilitating discomfort continued to increase.

She didn't want to admit the seriousness of what was happening. She tried to ignore it. She told herself it would pass and she would be normal again.

But, within a few short years, Dr. Puls knew that the pain had grown so great and limited her movement so severely that she could no longer perform surgery.

“When I finally realized what this meant,” Dr. Puls says, “I knew I had two choices. I could either get depressed and angry and spend my days wondering why this had happened to me or acknowledge that although I did not understand why this had happened, I could draw closer to my Heavenly Father and seek His will.”



Dr. Puls chose the second option. There had to be a reason for this, she told herself, and she wondered if, given her limitations, there wasn't somewhere she could volunteer and perhaps help others.

Not long after, Dr. Lorimer (“Chris”) Christensen, a volunteer for Church Welfare Services, approached her and asked if she would be interested in serving with him in the Church's neonatal resuscitation training program (NRT). Under Dr. Christensen's direction, doctors and neonatal resuscitation specialists traveled to emerging countries and taught doctors, nurses, and even midwives how to save the lives of newborn babies who were having difficulty breathing.

“More than a million babies die each year within the first several minutes of being born,” Dr. Puls says. “If I could do something to save lives, then it seemed a wonderful opportunity.”

Since that time, Dr. Puls has moved to Utah and, as her health permits, assists in the NRT

program. She has traveled to Peru, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, and Madagascar. If all goes well, she hopes to add Moldova, Samoa, and Tonga to her list of countries visited and helped.

“Our goal is to put ourselves out of business,” Dr. Puls says. “We teach the teachers. In July of this year, we taught 72 health care providers in Ecuador. In the last two months, those 72 have taught 830 others.”

Dr. Puls talks of one visit to Honduras where she gave a simple breathing apparatus to an LDS doctor. The next day he came to the seminar late.

“I was up at 3:00 this morning with a mother who was giving birth,” he said. “When the baby was born, he would not breathe. I used the apparatus you gave me yesterday and saved the baby’s life. Without it, I don’t think he would have survived the night.”

That’s the sort of thing that fills Dr. Puls’s days now. “It’s life-saving and life-changing

work,” she says. “Not only can we offer training that can save an infant’s life, but often we can prevent serious brain damage and prevent other harm that could come to the baby as a result of struggling to breathe after birth.”

This has been a life-changing experience for Dr. Puls as well. “I absolutely love it,” she says with a broad smile. “I love to look into the faces of people and see what this training means to them. They are so grateful. I know it is saving lives.”

Of course, Dr. Puls misses the career she was forced to leave behind. But she acknowledges the hand of the Lord in what has happened. “It may be that I needed this,” she says. “Sometimes our plans for our lives may not be what is best for us. Sometimes, we are blessed by unexpected events that bring us even greater joy and greater personal growth.”