

# Night Work in a Holy Place

*By Kent A. Hansen*

**T**he sliding security doors of Loma Linda University Medical Center open, releasing me into the freshness of a new night. A gibbous moon hangs low over the palm trees along the street. Venus shines bright to the west, the direction of my home. Faithful reminders of the world that continues outside.

The meetings are ended for the day, the contracts reviewed for now. The immediate future lies heavy in the soft-sided briefcase held in my left hand. After I put it in the back seat of my car and close the door, I turn and look back across the parking lot at the towers and ramparts of the giant institution that I serve as legal counsel. My eyes rest on the third row of lighted windows.

During the day, patients, vendors, clerks, nurses, medical residents, technicians, students, physicians, visitors, case managers, engineers, lawyers, and administrators throng the hospital in a Dickensian scene. The business of health care is being done.

At night, we moneychangers leave the temple, and the liturgy of healing commences. This is when I think the Medical Center does its best work. The tests are completed and the diagnoses made. The plans of care have been charted. The vigil of healing commences. Voices hush, nurses move from bedside to bedside in the consistent rhythms of care, in the perseverance of service.

In the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit on the third floor, seventy-two infants lie in seventy-two beds. They are very ill. The care they receive must be constant and focused, a labor of love on the precipitous perimeter between life and death. It is God's work. The stated mission of the Medical Center is "To continue the healing ministry of Jesus Christ."

These patients are almost impossibly tiny. They represent the best part of their mothers and fathers. They are dreams struggling for fulfillment, a match light cupped against the wind. Right at the start, when all should be delight and wonder, something has gone terribly wrong—a pancreas that produces too much insulin that eats away the flesh; the rampaging



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cells of leukemia; hearts with holes that seep life away with every beat; intestines where lungs should be breathing free.

The wonder turns to unbearable tension; the delight turns to dread in the acidic reduction of terror. Prayers of family and loved ones grope through the darkness for handholds of hope. Into these desperate moments enter the nurses and physicians, intervenors of grace, whose exacting and holy vocation is to support the smallest and the weakest in their grasp for life.

This is heart- and soul-risking work that requires exhausting concentration. These patients cannot describe their symptoms. Every sign must

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be read and interpreted without the communication of the patient. No tracker in the wilderness has a more difficult challenge. Standing alone in the parking lot, I look up toward the NICU and I see through the eyes of my heart these ministers of healing moving from crib to crib, lifting holy hands—caressing, adjusting, holding through the night.

It was there that I watched a mother and three-week-old daughter reach out to hold each other's hands. The baby girl rested high in a blanketed nest on a machine that warmed and circulated the blood that her own weak heart could not move adequately and that breathed the breaths her pneumonia-ravaged lungs could not breathe on their own. It was an altar of sorts, and we stood before it in a semicircle—the physicians, the nurses, and their lawyer, who is learning the ways of this place. The baby's eyes were bright and she smiled as her fingers touched her mom.

"How can it be?" I thought. Beside me stood the kind neonatologist whose own heart seems, of necessity, enlarged for the compassion and competence it must hold in balance.

"She looks so good—how long can it go on like this?" I asked.

He whispered, "The lungs and heart are really gone. Her other organs are shutting down. It would be over now except we all see exactly what you see and we don't quit."

I moved on through the unit, pausing crib by crib, observing the care and hearing stories of successes, crises, and heartbreaks. Moms rocked babies that could be held, and watched over those who couldn't. Nurses navigated gracefully amidst a tangle of tubes and wires and blinking lights.

All the while, my beeper vibrated urgently at my waist in message and duplicate message. When I finally emerged into the hallway outside, I returned the page. "Where were you?" an administrator demanded. "We need to talk about the contract."

"I'm sorry, but I was in the NICU. I thought it was kind of irreverent to stop and return the page."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that is a sacred place. Life and death are happening in there, and I don't think it is appropriate to interrupt the staff and say, 'Do you have a phone I can use? I need to tend to some business.'"

"Do you really feel like that?" he asked.

"I really feel like that."



Photo: Dawn Hickman

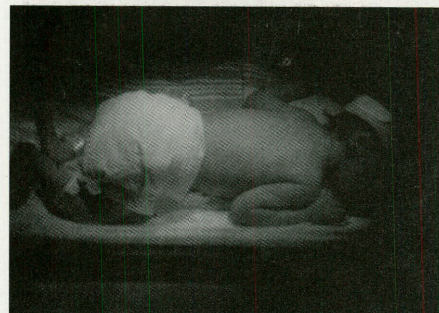


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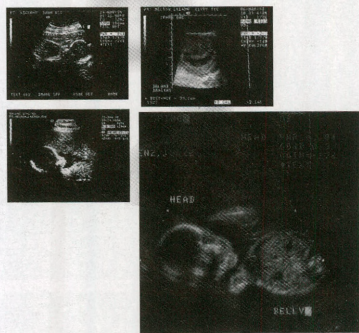


Every night since then, when I leave the Medical Center in darkness, I pause and look up at the lights on the third floor. In the Jerusalem Temple, worship took place twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It was led by professionals, Levites who ministered prayers and praise to a God whose presence was above all and yet so near and so needed as the source of life itself. They worked in shifts. Through the night, some of them were always on duty, doing as good a job at 3:00 A.M. as the day shift did at 3:00 P.M. They sang a song of devotion as they performed their faithful service keeping the light in the darkness.

Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,  
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!  
Lift up your hands to the holy place,  
and bless the Lord.  
May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,  
bless you from Zion.  
(Ps. 134)

It is this prayer that rises in my heart in the parking lot beneath the third-floor NICU. It is this prayer that I pray for those within before I drive home. There are cathedrals that are not churches. There are ministers who are not clergy. The healing ministry of Jesus Christ continues this night, in this place. "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:3).

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