

# European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

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## Editorial

### Dear colleagues, dear friends

A new year has started - new perspectives arise, hopefully for all of us! For RISH it means to enlarge our team, to professionalize our work and increase our scientific impact. Currently we are busy with organizing the 5th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health ECRSH in Gdansk, Poland, and the First National Conference on Spiritual Care in Bern, Switzerland (see announcement at the end). As a pre-conference of ECRSH there will again be the opportunity to participate in a 4-day research workshop with Prof. Harold Koenig and other experts. Register now!

In 2015 a professorship for spiritual care has been put into place at the University of Zurich, the second one in Europe. Prof. Simon Peng-Keller shares with us his perspective on the new academic discipline and speaks about opportunities in integrating religion and spirituality into health care.

Finally Dr. Oliver Merz, our new scientific assistant, introduces himself. Another new team member is Mirjam Wege. She is a bank clerk and will support the institute particularly in administrative terms.

*René Hefti, MD  
Oliver Merz, DTh*

## Topic

### Interview with Prof. Dr. theol. Simon Peng-Keller, Professorship for Spiritual Care, University of Zurich (Switzerland)

*Oliver Merz*

Simon Peng-Keller grew up in Chur (Switzerland) and is married with Dr. Ingeborg Peng-Keller. After studying theology in Fribourg / Switzerland and Lucerne he worked for four years in the parish of Liebfrauen / Zurich. Back at the University of Fribourg he earned his doctorate with a thesis on

mysticism research and qualified as a professor in the subjects of fundamental theology and theology of spirituality.

In 2015 he was elected as professor of spiritual care at the University of Zurich. At the same time Simon Peng-Keller teaches theology of spirituality at the Theological College of Chur. Together with his wife Ingeborg he offers spiritual exercises in the Lassalle-Haus (CH) and in the Black Forest.



1. Which book is currently on top of your writing desk or bedside table?

There are stacks of books on various topics: pain therapy, narrative research and classics on Christian spirituality. On top of this last stack is Teresa of Avila's „Interior Castle“.

2. What was the decisive factor for you to accept the call for the new professorship of spiritual care in Zurich?

In the new professorship different topics come together that were on my mind for many years: spirituality, health care chaplaincy and experiences at the end of life. To establish a new research and teaching area in a highly evolving field, holds many opportunities I would like to make use of in the best possible way.

3. What are your research and teaching emphases so far? What topics in the spectrum

of spiritual care particularly interest you?

I have a doctorate and habilitation in fundamental theology and theology of spirituality. I was always interested in interdisciplinary bridging. So for instance my doctorate dealt with the psychological and phenomenological mysticism research of the inter-nist Carl Albrecht. In the context of the professorship of spiritual care, I would like to continue my previous research on imaginative experience at the end of life, on narratives about dying, and on prayer, as well as tackle new subject areas such as the question on the nature of spiritual pain.

4. What is your personal contribution as a theologian and the genuine contribution of theology itself in the interdisciplinary field of spiritual care?

Theology keeps the question of the reality of God awake and can help to ensure that it will be considered also in the context of spiritual care. In addition, theology brings the reflective knowledge of pastoral care theory and training as well as the fundamental theological art of mediating between different spheres of discourse into the strongly medically coined discourse in spiritual care. Especially the latter is important for this interdisciplinary field.

5. What priorities have you set for building up the professorship?

It is mainly two goals that guide me at present: on the one hand to develop solid and practical courses for medical and theological students at the University of Zurich, on the other hand to build a research team which pursues current issues of spiritual care in a manner as broad-based as possible.

6. What research projects do you and your team currently work on?

The ongoing projects deal with the question of narrating and dreaming at the end of life, praying in clinical contexts, possibilities of interprofessional spiritual care training and documentation, with spiritual pain and the so-called oneiroid experience.

7. What should the professorship of spiritual care in Zurich both nationally and internationally stand for, be known for, in a few years?

I would be delighted if our research approaches would add weight to the perspective of the affected, in the scientific discourse as well as in the health care system. Furthermore we would like to advance the quest of an interprofessional spiritual care.

8. What are, in your opinion, the opportunities of the integration of religion and spirituality into health care?

I think that by including the spiritual dimension, health care in the medium and long term will be transformed profoundly. Both, the relationship between patients and health professionals as well as the approach to illness, dying and grief will be changed. Spirituality and religiosity can be important resources for ill people and their attendants, even if it sometimes can be a stress factor too.

9. What, from your point of view, is essential to widely implement the concerns of spiritual care in practice?

It takes personal competences and systemic preconditions. Without intensive reflective engagement with fundamental issues of human life in the horizon of the great religious and spiritual traditions, it is hardly possible to provide spiritual support to people in existential situations. From the institutional and socio-political side it requires financial and organisational frameworks. This begins with the anchoring of the matter in the professional formation and in further training and extends to organisational forms of interprofessional cooperation.

10. Which of your publications do you especially recommend to read for someone who does not know you yet?

A practical introduction to Christian spirituality is found in the book "Spirit-determined Life" („Geistbestimmtes Leben“, only available in German), which was published by the Theological Publishing House of Zurich (Theologischer Verlag Zürich TVZ). Anyone interested in visionary experience and symbolic communication at the end of life, has to read two further books that will be published by de Gruyter on this topic in the coming months.

#### Related links

Professorship for spiritual care in Zurich: [www.theologie.uzh.ch/de/faecher/spiritual-care/personen/simon-peng-keller.html](http://www.theologie.uzh.ch/de/faecher/spiritual-care/personen/simon-peng-keller.html)

Simon Peng-Keller (German): [www.christliche-kontemplation.ch/wir.htm](http://www.christliche-kontemplation.ch/wir.htm)

#### Translation

The Translation from German into English was realized by Lars Kägi, MD.

## News

### Dr. Oliver Merz - New Scientific Assistant at the Research Institute

April 2015 Dr. Oliver Merz became a scientific assistant at the Research Institute for Spirituality and Health RISH and supports the different activities of the institute. For example, Oliver Merz takes responsibility for the preparation of the „First National Conference on Spiritual Care 2016“ in Bern and teaches in the internship „Medicine and Spirituality“, which is a collaboration between the Research Institute and the Medical Faculty of the University of Bern. Oliver Merz studied theology in Switzerland and South Africa and finished his doc-



torate in June 2015. His previous research focus was inclusion, disability and pastoral ministry. In 1999, Oliver was ordained. Since then, he serves as a pastor in various churches in Switzerland. In addition he teaches as a guest lecturer at Swiss theological colleges and seminaries, currently with specialist expertise in the fields of empirical theology and christology. He is supervisor and reviewer of academic theses, gives talks and seminars.

Oliver Merz is married to Monika. They have three children. He and his family are living in Thun, in the beautiful Bernese Oberland. Oliver likes to paint and make music, plays guitar, drums and cajon.

## Announcements

### Meetings & Conferences

*(Save the dates!)*

#### Conference on Medicine and Religion

March 4-6, 2016; Houston, TX/USA  
[www.medicineandreligion.com](http://www.medicineandreligion.com)

#### First National Conference on Spiritual Care

April 02, 2016; University Hospital  
Bern/Switzerland  
[www.fisg.ch/tagung](http://www.fisg.ch/tagung)

#### 5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health ECRSH16

May 12-14, 2016; Gdansk/Poland  
[www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu)

#### Pre-Conference Research Workshop with Prof. Harold G. Koenig and other experts

May 08-11, 2016; Gdansk/Poland  
[www.ecrsh.eu/research-workshop-koenig-2014](http://www.ecrsh.eu/research-workshop-koenig-2014)

#### Inaugural Conference of the International Association of Spiritual Care (IASC)

June 19-21, 2016; Bern/Switzerland  
[www.ia-sc.org/conferences](http://www.ia-sc.org/conferences)

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> International Spirituality in Healthcare Conference - 'Nurturing the Spirit'

June 23, 2016; Dublin/Ireland  
[www.nursing-midwifery.tcd.ie/events-conferences/nurturingthespirit\\_conf2016.php](http://www.nursing-midwifery.tcd.ie/events-conferences/nurturingthespirit_conf2016.php)

#### Colloque Soins et Spiritualité: Evolutions à l'occasion du départ de Cosette Odier

November 18, 2016; Lausanne CH  
Information: [Cosette.Odier@chuv.ch](mailto:Cosette.Odier@chuv.ch)

### Imprint

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