

## ITEST Member Spotlight

### Kevin Powell, MD, PhD

Math and science have been my primary interests since childhood, but I developed a deeper interest in religion and ethics through campus ministry. My undergraduate grades certainly told me that engineering should be my profession, not theology. Even today, I recognize that I am much better at applied ethics than philosophy or systematic theology. Multiple people have told me I do not think like most doctors. I say thank you, sometimes not sure whether they really meant it as a compliment, but it is one to me. I think like a design engineer rather than a philosopher, but I can speak both jargons. Over the years, my key contributions to projects have often hinged on being bilingual in that way.

Throughout a first career in medical research, I, as a scientist, was interested in the ethical issues of developing new technologies, particularly the economic justice involved in creating extremely high cost treatments such as gene therapy. Ultimately, those ethical issues of technology became more important to me than inventing a particular technology. The Russell-Einstein Pugwash Manifesto (not the Bible) convinced me that scientists are responsible for what they create. At the time, grad school at MIT was not keen on embracing that responsibility, but I sought out any opportunity to explore the interface between science and ethics while earning the PhD in medical engineering. The Lutheran-Episcopal campus ministry in grad school nourished my broad quest and a very understanding doctoral thesis advisor allowed the time alongside the engineering research, which was also multidisciplinary and focused on the interface of cell membranes. I then opted to seek the MD degree and get involved in the new field of clinical ethics consulting and hospital ethics committees, a field that was attracting philosophy students to the interface between ethics and medical practice. I like and understand interfaces between different realms. I suppose that is my superpower.

I heard about ITEST shortly after completing my residency in pediatrics in 1993. The annual ITEST conferences attracted many priests and theologians who had long dabbled in science and religion. Now retired or part-time, many of them could finally devote the desired time to the faith/science encounter. The conferences also attracted scientists like me who had ethical concerns. In 1998, Pope John Paul II published the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, affirming that “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” ITEST was ahead of its time.

Only recently, as iPhones, social media, and artificial intelligence have transformed society, has MIT (and many other engineering schools) fully embraced the need for its graduates to understand the ethical implications of new technology. Its coursework now offers a taste of moral responsibility along with feasts of calculus and physics. The imagery I suggest is that even a small amount of carbon and manganese turns brittle iron bars into much stronger steel alloys. Likewise, scientific progress is enhanced by even small amounts of learning in ethics, social justice, and deontology. (Theology also benefits from a spoonful of science, but that is not my bailiwick.)

ITEST has also long been dedicated to taking the wisdom it generates about science/religion and sharing those insights with others. I was a pediatrician for almost 30 years, but there are people

far more skilled than I at teaching children. So I was not involved in the massive Creation Lens project when ITEST generated curriculum on science and religion for K-12.

I have focused my writing and teaching toward practicing physicians and medical ethicists. I have written columns about medical professionalism, law, and technology for a monthly trade newspaper for 14 years. I also moderated a pediatric hospital medicine email subscription listserv for 15 years. That listserv allows practicing physicians to share, compare, assess, and implement changes in practice more efficiently and more wisely than reading journals or attending conferences. Professionally, my contributions as moderator have done far more for society than my engineering patents. The future, however, is not newspaper and emails. It is webinars and podcasts. Sebastian Mahfood has led ITEST into that future. I am not photogenic, charismatic, or frankly, that articulate in public speaking. I write. So do not expect to often see me in webinars. "A man has got to know his limitations," said Dirty Harry in *Magnum Force*. (I am a museum and film buff.)

I am dedicated to inclusivity and ecumenical activities. For 18 years I served on a committee associated with the ELCA Lutheran denomination that is similar to ITEST. I worked at America's only free-standing Catholic children's hospital for several years and served on its ethics committee. I can speak both Lutheran and Catholic as needed. It is good to be bilingual.