



testimony

my journey into leadership

Julie Smith reflects on how
she became a nurse leader

It was Christmas Eve 1981. On the ninth floor, of a ward block, of a London hospital, I was a student nurse with a dying patient. The ward was busy that night, but my Sister's instructions were clear. 'Your job this shift is to stay with your patient.' Little did I know that night that the experience was to seal in me a deep sense of respect for compassionate leaders. I hadn't wanted to be a nurse: I had wanted to be an air traffic controller. Money and circumstances were against that plan, I also failed to get into college to be a nursery nurse, but for some reason a door to nursing had opened and here I was.

On Sister Florence's ward, it was normal to pray at the beginning of the shift as she was a woman of faith. Here she was, on Christmas Eve, teaching me to deal with death and dying by prioritising and shutting out all other noise. I had always believed in God, but it was to be another eight years before I knew him for myself.

Prior to that experience in 1981, I had been sent to work on an older people's unit, or geriatric ward as we called them then. Whilst there, I witnessed some horrific examples of disrespect and cruelty to the people in our care. My initial response had been to go home

and pack my bags — this job really wasn't for me. I don't remember what it was that made me change my mind, but I am sure that experience made me very conscious of a strong sense of justice and intolerance of poor practice.

Later, I had no alternative but to whistleblow in two different organisations. I lost my job both times, but I survived, and I would do the same again if necessary. Perhaps you have days where you feel ineffective, unable to express your faith for fear of recrimination, or are unsure of what the future holds. Nursing is the most amazing profession, but it can also be difficult to thrive. I have found that the values I hold dear have sustained me and led me to be brave in the face of challenges.

Here I am decades later, still a nurse but now leading improvement projects in an Acute Trust. Those early experiences, of learning to be faithful in a privileged position, have helped me develop my Christian character. Down the years, it has been an honour and a privilege to walk with nurses who needed a light in the dark, nurses who had lost their way and nurses who could no longer remember why they nursed at all. Through the grace of God, I have found myself in situations which needed honesty and integrity and the courage

to stand up against workplace culture so that we retained the skills of good people.

It is only now that I realise why God made me a nurse. It wasn't because I had a strong sense of a calling to clinical environments. But because my frontline is the workforce — my job is caring for the carers. Today, you will find me positioned close to the executive team and operating across all levels and disciplines to deliver the set objectives to lead the way in improving systems and services. Though this is my job, it isn't my calling. My calling is to be there, be present, an ambassador for Christ and a willing servant. My day job requires political astuteness and a recognition that maintaining confidence and upholding confidentiality is not just a necessity on the ward but it's also important when working with the board. I am proud to be trusted with much and as someone remarked recently, I have a unique and enviable position of being able to interact with all staff, at all levels, from the ward to those working for national regulators and commissioning organisations.

For me the essence of nursing is authenticity in all situations. It is God who opens doors and I think had I not been a nurse, I would have missed out on much.

I could not have foreseen this that night as I looked out across London and stayed with my patient as he departed this life. But I do know that those experiences were fundamental to who I am today, this is the scripture that often lights my way:

'Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'
Philippians 1:6

Next year, I hope to attend the 40-year reunion with my former fellow students from the Nightingale School of Nursing. Many have since written of their faith in Christ, something I wasn't aware of at the time. Sister Florence is retired now, but we wrote to each other a few years back when my daughter began her training at the same school. She was introduced to a Christian mentor who happened to be the sister of Sister Florence! What impact these nurses have had! I only hope I achieve the same. 🌱

Julie Smith trained at St Thomas and now works in Norwich as a quality improvement director at a local hospital