

Compassion for the suffering

In England in the 1940s, a young woman entered Oxford University with little focus. She had no idea what to do with her life.

But she soon came under the influence of a colorful professor of English named C.S. Lewis, a British writer and lay theologian who held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford and Cambridge universities. The young woman became a Christian through much of his influence.

She left Oxford, against the advice of friends and family, and began to study nursing. After five more years of rigorous training, she was certified as nurse.

But her story doesn't end there; her questing Christian spirit would not let her rest with the way things were. You see, she had ended up working in a cancer ward in a London hospital.

Gradually, she came to realize that most of the doctors ignored the patients who were deemed terminally ill. As a result, she watched many of them die virtually alone.

Greatly troubled, she felt that Christian compassion needed to be expressed to these patients in a visible way. She approached the hospital administration with an idea she had for surrounding those dying of cancer with friends and loved ones during their last days – rather than isolating them in sterile rooms with strangers. Her radical ideas were quickly rejected.

Undaunted, she decided to enroll in medical school to try to make a difference, even though she was already 33 years old and would not graduate until she was 39. This she did, and later a movement grew around the ideas that made it possible for dying patients to live their days in a setting of love and support.

Cicely Saunders – out of Christian compassion and a sense of calling to help in a specific way – began this movement in England in the 1950s. It later moved to America and is now used everywhere and in every town. It is called the Hospice Movement, and it draws its inspiration from Jesus' own passion and compassion for His children – “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

In the mission to which we are called in Life Care and Century Park, let us pray that God will continually come to us in new ways and in fresh images so that more among us, like Cicely Saunders, can be moved and inspired to take risks to join in God's compassion for His children.

Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass (Psalm 37:5 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter