



The Life and Legacy of Dr. Virginia Catherine Patterson

As we celebrate students and young egalitarian leaders in this issue of Mutuality, we also recognize the important work of mentors in their lives. Therefore, please join us in honoring one of CBE's great mentors, who led CBE's ministry with wisdom and boldness for many years.

Christians have always believed that virtue is not so much taught as caught. Since we acquire qualities more by example than instruction, Scripture advises us to select our friends and mentors carefully (Prov. 13:20). For this reason, I could not be more grateful to have worked beside Virginia Patterson for more than fifteen years.

We first met at Wheaton College, at the conference of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) in 1993. Of course her reputation preceded her. While serving as adjunct faculty at Wheaton College and also Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Patterson was nearing the end of a distinguished career as president and CEO of Pioneer Clubs, a position she held for twenty-seven years. I was awed by her achievements as a leader and author, yet realized she was a humble woman of few words. Her sharp mind fueled her capacity to listen and discern. No wonder there was always admiration in the air whenever Virginia's name was evoked. It seemed everyone in CBE turned to her for wisdom. And, in this we were not alone.

Her accomplishments in leadership theory and management were recognized by distinguished awards from various evangelical organizations. Significantly, Virginia was

the first and only woman to receive the Christian Management Award (1996) by (what is now) the Christian Leadership Alliance. In observing her participation on evangelical boards like SEND and ECFA, one executive said, "Her commitment, her common sense, and logical approach to things, and her willingness to stand alone if necessary, are just outstanding."

It was her willingness to go alone that characterized Patterson's service to Christ early in her life. As a single woman, she sailed to Nigeria where, for ten years, she served with the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), educating hundreds of missionary children. With SIM, Virginia discovered her lifelong passion to empower youth. And, her "wonderful missionary kids," as she called them, loved and admired her. One of her students became a missionary teacher himself. To him, Virginia was "a wonderful role model and a woman of great faith." Though she went to Nigeria without a husband or

children, she returned a spiritual mother to hundreds. They were family to her the rest of her life.

A willingness to go alone also distinguished Patterson as an advocate of gender inclusivity, which was, for her, a biblical mandate. As CEO and president of Pioneer Girls,



A mentor to many: Dr. Virginia Catherine Patterson (1931-2012)

Virginia decided to include boys throughout its mission and programs. Though controversial, her vision grew the organization to reach 160,000 children a year with clubs in over 4,000 churches worldwide. Pioneer Girls became Pioneer Clubs because, for Patterson, God's mission on earth is accomplished by both males and females. The gifts of women and men together constitute the work of the church, and on this point she was uncompromising. Inasmuch as she included boys equally within the mission of Pioneer Clubs, she was also determined to see women included in all levels of Christian service and leadership.

Beginning with her church, Virginia developed a strategy. She approached the elders of her church, asking them to consider an egalitarian interpretation of Scripture. Though the elders were world-renowned Bible scholars, Patterson was unintimidated. To make her case, she visited them each personally. She told me once how she waited patiently at one

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elder's home while he mowed his lawn. As he pushed his lawn mower back and forth, Virginia stood smiling at him from his living room window, eager to engage him theologically. I am not sure who was more courageous that day, Virginia or her elder. Her holy boldness helped move a community of scholars from a male-only model of leadership to one where women now serve as elders. Inevitably, Virginia was ordained as

an elder in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Wheaton, IL. She also served on many denominational committees. As one of her missionary kids said, "Her influence was epic!"

In 1995, Patterson joined the board of CBE as chair, perceiving the need to transition our board from managing tasks to identifying policies. She not only developed board policies with a focus on governance, she also established a process of strategic planning that helped create a more vibrant and sustainable organization. For more than fifteen years I watched this fearless Cherokee woman lead CBE, churches, organizations, and individuals, always motivated

by mission rather than human accolade. And, she was restless in her search for new and better ways to serve.

Even while growing Pioneer Clubs, Patterson found time to become a licensed counselor and to complete her doctorate in education, believing that higher education equips women for strategic leadership. She pursued knowledge not for self-aggrandizement, but in order to serve others more skillfully. In all of this she stands alone in placing her ambition, time, and talents at the service of others; in never taking the easy path; and in always giving much more than 100 percent.

Virginia made it clear, not so much through words but through her actions, that leadership is some of the most demanding yet sanctifying work God can give. Perhaps there is no better way to celebrate her life and legacy than with the words of Saint Francis of Assisi who, like Virginia, stood alone in challenging the powers and personalities that choked life out of the church. He, like Virginia, left the world not with great literary works but with a spirit of love and prodigious effort that had the good of others as their chief aim. Like Francis, Virginia's passion to serve God and others is her legacy. She embodied the prayer of Saint Francis, who said:

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—*Saint Francis of Assisi*

Virginia identified two organizations where memorial gifts might be made in her name, Christians for Biblical Equality and Pioneer Clubs. As we honor Virginia's legacy through a generous gift to CBE and Pioneer Clubs, consider also how we might prayerfully follow in Virginia's footsteps through taking part in mentoring relationships, sharing our spiritual gifts and ministry experience in walking beside those who are called to lead.

A version of this article originally appeared at Her.meneutics.com, *Christianity Today's* website for women (ChristianityToday.com/women).