

Tribute to Virginia G. Neely

August 10, 1928–August 30, 2018

by Paula Clayton Dempsey

Welcoming and ushering in the “new” in Baptist life is a centerpiece of the legacy of Virginia Neely, who died August 30, 2018 at the age of 90. For 52 years Virginia served alongside her husband, Alliance founder Alan Neely, teaching, writing, editing and collaborating in a ministry that has brought lasting renewal not only to Baptists, but also to the larger church.

With undergraduate and graduate degrees in English, as well as a Master of Divinity degree, Virginia’s keen intellect and skillful writing served as a compliment to Alan’s vision and academic pursuits. Her warmth and humor equipped them to follow God’s call that led them, along with their three children Jennifer, Betsie and Roger, to missionary service in Columbia, South America, for 13 years.

Virginia’s vision of women’s rightful place in ministry in the church is embodied in the volume she and Anne Neil coedited: *The New Has Come*, published in 1989 by the Alliance. The collection of case studies of ordained women’s experiences was offered at a time when women in the pastorate was a rarity as a way of fostering dialogue and awareness in local churches.

Among the archives in the library of Wake Forest University are the papers of Alan Neely, organized and preserved by Virginia. His devotion to the Alliance and her devotion to Alan made Alan’s seminal and long-lasting contribution to the Alliance possible, offers Alliance founder Mahan Siler.

“Mostly she was the invisible presence—editor, scheduler, cheerleader—for Alan’s formidable impact on the Alliance’s early years,” Mahan writes. Former Alliance associate director Jeanette Holt remembers, “Virginia made it possible for Alan to be Alan. She always supported him in whatever endeavor he wanted to undertake.”

Perhaps my most treasured memory of Virginia is when I went to visit her after having made a commitment to serve on the staff of the Alliance. Having known her since my seminary student days, she celebrated me taking on leadership in this young Baptist body in which she and Alan had invested such energy and hope.

I can still see her now literally cheering me on. I also see Virginia cheering the Alliance on as we live into being a theological home for progressive Baptists pursuing God’s justice and love in partnership. Thank you, Virginia. Because of people like you and Alan, the new has come.

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