

Interview: Ginny Viola, Marketplace Network Veteran



Virginia (“Ginny”) Viola is an unsung hero and leader in the faith at work movement. For much of her life and career women have been systematically excluded from formal leadership positions in both secular and Christian organizations. And while MBA programs across the USA now enroll nearly 50% women students and today’s workplaces are thoroughly integrated in terms of gender, the Old Boys fellowships continue their exclusive ways. However, when I arrived at Gordon-Conwell in the Fall of 2010 and reviewed boxes of files from the history of marketplace ministry in the Boston area over the past thirty years I was struck by the volume of evidence that a woman named Virginia Viola played a singular role in promoting the integration of faith and work.

Organizing and hosting meetings, helping to write or edit study curricula, building the network, keeping the records, caring for people, generously supporting the programs . . . without fanfare or recognition she was a servant leader of the highest order.

Ginny graduated from Smith College in 1963 and spent the next ten years working in campus ministry at Smith and UMass Amherst and in college and women’s ministries at Park Street Church. From 1977 to 1988 she organized and helped manage Viola Allegro & Erler Medical Associates (the internal medicine practice of her husband Dr. Joe Viola and his associates). From 1988 to 2002 she launched and was President of Medical Office Solutions. In 2002 she graduated from Gordon-Conwell with the MDiv. She was a Marketplace Network Board member and volunteer staff member, mentor, and study group facilitator from 2002 to 2008. In 2008 she published Living in Two Economies: Following Christ into the Marketplace. She has served as Chair of the Board for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

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Faith Story

David Gill: At what point in your life did you become self-consciously, thoughtfully Christian?

Virginia Viola: It was during my sophomore year at Smith College. I think since I was 12 years old, I was trying to figure out what made life meaningful or purposeful. I thought it had to be more than money because I saw a lot of wealthy people on the north shore of Long Island who didn’t seem that happy. I saw other people who were happy but didn’t have a lot and I couldn’t quite figure it out. About the time I went off to boarding school for high school, many of my parents’ friends were getting divorced and I remember wondering if there is any way to know you could have a love that would last a lifetime. It seemed to me unpredictable who would make it and who wouldn’t. All of those questions somehow drove me back to this: is there a God who created us, who is engaged with our lives, who helps us know how to be happy, who can build relationships? If there is a God like that, I would like to know him.

Gill: So you’re wandering around Smith College thinking these thoughts. Were your parents Christians?

Viola: My father went to an Episcopalian Church but he was more of a “cultural Christian” than a personally-engaged one. Later the Christian faith did become more personally meaningful to my father

but at the time my parents were very nervous about my involvement with a Christian fellowship at Smith because it seemed so different from anything they'd ever known.

Gill: Okay, so, when you were a sophomore you self-consciously decided "I'm going to be a follower of Jesus Christ."

Viola: During my freshman year my roommate had challenged me "Ginny, give me one good reason why life is worth living and I shouldn't commit suicide." I said I didn't know the answer and was trying to figure it out for myself but, "don't do anything rash! We've got four years to figure it out." Sadly, my roommate was asked to leave school because she was caught collecting sleeping pills. Our house mother knew I was very upset and sometime after all this she introduced me to a dinner guest who was a staff member with a campus Christian organization. This woman met with me several times and so patiently answered my questions. I'd never met anybody like this before. Unlike a couple Christian girls I had met on campus whose main concern was my smoking and drinking, for the first time a Christian sister cared for me and helped me see that I could know Jesus, that I could trust the Bible as somehow written by God, what the reasons were for this kind of faith, and what it all might mean for my life. I remember riding my bike down the streets of North Hampton and thinking, "God, this seems too good to be true but I'm inviting you into my life to be my Savior and Lord." After that I couldn't put the Bible down. I just wanted to read it every free minute, and when I'd ask God a question, the Bible would be giving me an answer. This was a conversation with God and his Word which has continued to this day.

Building a Medical Practice

Gill: So basically, you were driven to faith partly by sort of the personal meaning of life kind of question and also by the relational side -- watching relational break downs and wondering if there isn't a better way. What happened when you graduated from Smith?

Viola: I worked in a college ministry for a few years because I wanted to give back to others what had been so meaningful to me. Then, when I married Joe Viola, a medical internist in Boston, I decided I would help him start a medical practice. I've always loved to start things and Joe had been working in a neighborhood health center but really wanted his own practice. I developed and managed his practice for about 12 years as it grew to have several partners.

Gill: You were dealing with everything from finance to relationships with patients and partners . . .

Viola: And pharmaceutical companies . . . the whole range of business and management activities.

Faith Comes Alive at Work

Gill: At what point in your working life did you begin to think that your Christian faith must have something to do with the way you carried out your work life --- and not just about your church life and your afterlife and inner life?

Viola: I had several "aha" moments. While I was developing Joe's practice and I also started my own business which served a number of doctors outside his office. I realized first of all that church didn't

much address life from “9 to 5.” I wondered what workplace Christians could do for fellowship or for outreach in their business lives. So that Sunday to Monday gap was increasingly on my mind

Another important experience for me was hiring, managing, and mentoring a woman named Maya. She was a quick study but she came from a very dysfunctional family and had never been told how good or smart she was. She grew with me even as I started my own company. After maybe three years or so, as she was asking me about how I would handle some issue, I said, “Well, I have a relationship with God that makes a difference in how I approach that issue.” I told her I’d be glad to talk about it but there was no pressure to talk about God at work if she wasn’t interested. We did start the conversation and within a couple years she became a Christian. This was a whole different form of outreach than I’d ever seen before; she didn’t just hear the Gospel as a narrowly “religious” message, she also saw me on my good days and my bad ones; she heard me apologize for a mistake; she saw how honesty and high ethics were at the heart of our medical billing and other business practices. She saw how we handled failure, how we approached compensation and pension benefits. Medicare reimbursements brought up lots of issues of potential unfairness, abuse, and fraud. I realized that I was accountable to Jesus, not just to the law; I had to do the right thing, not just avoid getting caught or just do what others did. I never thought I’d be asking myself all those questions of how my faith should affect my work as a manager.

Gill: Did you have other people who helped you reflect on these questions or were you pretty much doing it on your own? Did the churches you were a part ever help you out in this adventure?

Viola: I don’t think I ever went to a pastor because none of them had ever had a day job other than at a church. A woman friend and I started a before-work morning Bible study called “Tuesday Edition” and a once a month “Women in the Marketplace” group. We got nice logo coffee mugs you could put on your desk to create a conversation. Once a month we would have a speaker on a topic that working women would deal with and we could bring friends from work. Marketplace ministry like this is one of the most creative ways to do outreach because you’re scratching where people itch. Many people wouldn’t think Jesus was relevant to their job but when they hear discussions about how to deal with conflict and bad relationships, how to forgive a boss, how to deal with balance, time management, or personal budgeting, it is a different story. We just began to model some different choices. The very fact that we were asking these questions and people had really thought about them and their faith had interfaced with their answers, sometimes drew people to Christ.

Gill: What about books? When was the first time you found a book that helpfully talked about faith at work?

Viola: The first faith at work material I ever read was by Dan Smick, a Gordon-Conwell seminary student with ten years in hospital management before seminary. Dan’s passion was to help people read the Bible through a working person’s lens, and be able to create a vocabulary that could be used in the everyday marketplace. I also read a book, I think called *Why Work?*, by two authors out west. They compared classical Greek and Roman views toward work with biblical and Christian perspectives and showed how totally radical the Biblical Christian view is. A 1981 encyclical on work and vocation by Pope John Paul --- *On Human Work* --- was one of the best things I ever read. I was astonished to discover the great thinkers from many different traditions who have given some thought to this; why had we never heard this before on “main street”!

Dan Smick and Boston's Marketplace Ministry

Gill: Am I right that Dan Smick was the key person who started the Marketplace Network? How were you involved in this movement?

Viola: In the very beginning Dan sought me and Joe out. We were all dreaming about various ways to do "seeker sensitive" ministry in Boston at Park Street Church. Our dream was to have Gordon Conwell training pastors, some local churches serving as models, and a growing network together for outreach in the city. We were trying to figure out when would meet, how we would work the logistics, how we might need to deal with childcare and things like that. It was very exciting and Dan Smick's seminars that I attended were really good. I can point to probably twenty people whose lives were turned around just by getting to know Dan Smick. He got them excited about marketplace and workplace ministry in ways that they had never thought of or seen before. People were clearly hungry for something like this.

Gill: Was this in the early Nineties?

Viola: Yes, although they were not officially incorporated until 1996 when they decided to raise funds and take it to the next level. I worked with Dan but I couldn't join his board because I was working hard in my business, and I was chair of the Intervarsity board, and also taking some courses at Gordon Conwell. Initially it was a loose network run by Dan but then some interns were funded by Park Street Church to write Bible studies about work. Randy Kilgore was one of the earliest of these writers. He was hired to write Bible studies based on the "30 moments" --- questions that marketplace people asked. Dan and his buddies did a survey of secular working people and came up with their Thirty. That study material got written, distributed, and used for several years and is still available I believe. These studies were used in adult ed curricula in churches and workplace study groups wherever there was interest. The Marketplace Network Inc. also created a web site in the late nineties and built a mailing list of individuals and churches. I had also been creating and leading my own marketplace Bible studies with my Tuesday Edition group, by the way.

Gill: So as I understand it, Dan Smick brought tremendous energy and charismatic leadership to the Boston Marketplace network from the early or mid-Nineties until his sudden bout with cancer and his death in 1999. Kent Kusel was hired as Dan's successor and led the organization until it closed down in 2007. Do I have this right?

Viola: Yes. When I finished my seminary degree in 2002, I agreed to come on the Marketplace Network Inc. board. We had maybe a dozen different study groups going on and a lot of progress to be thankful for but the future of the organization was increasingly uncertain. By 2007 I think there was a clear sense that the organization had served its purpose and it was time to move on. Today's Theology of Work Project is one of the spiritual heirs of the Marketplace Network Inc. and many of its leaders had been active there. Park Street and several other churches have their own workplace initiatives now. So it was an exciting run for over a decade and the seeds it planted have flowered in wonderful ways.

Faith at Work Counsel to an Individual Disciple

Gill: As you look back on all you have experienced and learned on this adventure, what advice would you give to an individual workplace Christian who would like to grow and take his or her faith to work in some significant ways? What steps should they take?

Viola: Well, first of all, let's say it's very hard to be on your own. So maybe that's the first thing: find a friend with a similar interest and commitment. Then get one of those workplace Bible studies or books. If you do this and start growing yourself, you will have something fresh and interesting on your mind that you can share with others. And at work ask people questions to find out what they are thinking. So, yes, I would be praying to find a Christian who would want to start a study or a lunch discussion with you.

You might invite some others to think about some of the ethical issues that come up at work or even discuss how people's religion and faith might relate to their views of work and business. You could use the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible to be more comfortable for Jewish colleagues --- but most people would agree that Jesus was a great teacher so centering the study on his teaching can still draw people.

You might start by praying for a Christian friend or two to start a discussion group; then you could invite other people to join in. You might do it on site to be more convenient – or off-site to be less threatening – but almost certainly after hours to stay clear of interfering with work responsibilities. You might want to look at the grid of the "30 questions" people ask at work as a basis for a study and discussion group. This is still available with introduction and commentary entitled "Understanding & Navigating MNI's Work as Ministry Framework" at www.mockler.org and at Randy Kilgore's www.madetomatter.org web site.

Gill: It sounds like you're saying don't wait too long to engage even non-Christians and other people in your workplace about the substance of this approach to work and career. You might even be asking a Jewish or Muslim colleague about how their faith relates to work, or even an atheist or New Ager what they think about spirituality and values. So you become kind of a gentle promoter of conversation about these things, even though you're pretty much of a rookie at exploring them yourself.

Viola: And usually your excitement about what you're reading or thinking is infectious. I think of a lot of intentional questions that create good conversation. "How would you handle such and such a situation? How do you handle loss? Or what's been the hardest experience you've ever been through?" And then if it is appropriate you could ask "Does God ever factor into the way you handle this situation? Do you have any kind of a spiritual background or orientation that factors into how you think about this?"

Here is something else: if someone tells me they're really upset about something, I have never found anyone to object to my saying "you know what, I am going to pray for you. I believe in a God who cares about us and our work so I'm going to pray for you. Keep me in the loop."

What the Church Can Do for Workplace Disciples

Gill: Let me ask about pastors and churches. If your pastor comes to you and says, "Ginny, tell me a couple things that we could do here at our church that would provide better support and help to our workplace church members in their 9-5 lives; what could we do here at our church that would be helpful to them?" What would you say to that pastor?

Viola: What I recommend first is an adult-ed or Sunday School class on faith at work. Test the waters and do it for 12 weeks and then evaluate. There is a lot of material, lots of books out there, that could be the basis for such a study. I would also suggest some shorter events --- seminars or workshops for those who can't commit to several weeks. Our church has experimented with Saturday mornings, all day Saturdays, and Sunday after church luncheon seminars. I have also done dinners at my condo with a simple buffet meal.

One approach is to organize a panel presentation. Your best people may not have the time or capacity to prepare a formal talk but they have a wealth of information they could share on a panel. You're helping to create a dialog on a subject. You give your panelists three questions ahead of time. Then you have a two hour meeting with a meal and with quality discussion around the table. At Park Street we did bagels and coffee around tables where you sat regularly so you could build some relationships along with the head stuff. We had a table leader and host at each of those tables.

Faith at Work Initiatives in the Business Community

Gill: Finally, let's think about three or four Christian business leaders off in some town or city somewhere who are saying "we need to do something for the business community that will integrate our faith and work better." What would you advise those people as they think about doing something for their colleagues and local businesses?

Viola: First, you might organize a regular breakfast where they can hear the story and the issues another business leader has faced and worked through as a thoughtful Christian. I would probably do it from 7:00 to 8:30 before work. The speaker could have 45 minutes. I also like the evening model from 6:00 to 8:00 right after work but that may be harder on family commitments. In addition to the content of the presentation and discussion at such events, people's networks grow and mentoring relationships often are begun. Something that I did from Bible studies and seminars, that meant a lot to people, was to prepare some summary reflections I called "Notes on the Journey." Sometimes people would send these two-page e-mail reports on to a friend with a note saying "this is from the dinner I went to that you couldn't attend last week, but the next one's going to be such and such . . ." One woman took these "Notes on the Journey" back to Nairobi, Kenya, and started a faith at work study group there. I can imagine a brief podcast as another way of sharing the experience.