

Two Nervous Old Women Who Went Where Men Feared to Go: The Story of Hannah and Patty More

The strapping, six-foot tall church warden and his friend came hat-in-hand to the timid old ladies. “I’m personally afraid to go into Charter House,” he said. “Won’t you go?”

Charter House was a small hamlet in the rural countryside near Cheddar, England, described as “so wicked and lawless that they report thieving to have been handed down from father to son for the last forty years.” When a woman from Charter House was condemned to be hanged for stealing overpriced butter, the church warden knew things had reached a new low. “And it was here that these tender-hearted churchwardens wished to send two nervous women,” commented Patty More after the interview, “really for the above reason of personal fear.”



**“It is impossible to pray sincerely for the well-being of others without being desirous of contributing to it.”
Hannah More**

The More sisters, Hannah and Patty, had set up Sunday schools in neighboring villages with great success. Would they consider going into Charter House?

Sunday school was a rather new idea in 1798. Unlike its namesake today, these classes were created to teach children from the poorest families to read. Children were a vital part of the economy. On weekdays they were used to help with farming, or to work full days in mines or factories to help support the family. But on Sunday all of England rested from its labors. Sunday school teachers used the Bible as their textbook, teaching children and teens to read in the hope that they would then read the Bible for themselves and to their families.

Patty and Hannah were experienced educators. Their father was a teacher, and as soon as their two older sisters graduated, they started a school of their own. Hannah and Patty attended this school, graduated and returned as teachers. Patty would spend the rest of her career as an educator, while Hannah left to become a playwright and author.

But eventually, Hannah grew tired of the superficial life of the literary elite in Bristol. She met some “religious Enthusiasts” who had come to a vital knowledge of God. Hannah’s life of fashion and other entertainments seemed meaningless in

comparison. She decided to retire to the countryside, out of the easy reach of her society friends, to focus on her relationship with God.

But to her dismay, she discovered that moving didn’t seem to help. She wrote to her pastor-friend John Newton, complaining, “I do not find that I am one bit better. . . . You will tell me that if the affections be estranged from their proper object, it signifies not much whether a bunch of roses or a pack of cards affects it. I pass my life intending to get the better of this, but life is passing away, and the reform never begins.” Newton wisely replied that this desire for God was the first step on the road to conversion, and that not all conversions are dramatic—some appear to be gradual. Hannah progressed in her faith over the following months and years, and did come to know God, but she never found satisfaction in the contemplative life. Instead, Hannah found purpose in serving others for the sake of Christ.

It started with a suggestion from William Wilberforce after a visit to the destitute families living in caves around Cheddar. “Miss Hannah More,” he said, “something must be done for Cheddar. . . . If you will be at the trouble, I will be at the expense.” “Something” meant a Sunday school, and before they were finished, Hannah and Patty More would rent buildings, hire teachers, raise funds and oversee the set up of 11 schools in Cheddar and the surrounding area with a total of 1,000 students—including a school near Charter House.

Every Sunday the sisters made the rounds of half the schools to supervise the hired teachers and encourage the students. Hannah and Patty believed that kindness and not terror was the best motivator for children, which was revolutionary thinking for educators of the time period. They planned incentives—a penny for attending three weeks in a row or gingerbread for learning a verse. Soon, established Sunday Schools were able to send former students to help teach in newer schools. Lives were changed by the power of the Word, read over and over as the children did their lessons. Crime and drunkenness went down in villages with a Sunday school. Church attendance and productivity went up.

Patty took the lead in administrating the Sunday Schools, freeing Hannah to write 10 books after her 60th birthday. Both worked tirelessly on behalf of education, abolition and other social issues—two nervous old women unreservedly serving a mighty God.