



**Made for More Family:
Cultivating Intergenerational Relationships in Ministry
Susan Shepherd**

Our family recently enjoyed a long weekend together in a "family reunion" setting—with extended family making new memories together and regaling one another with old memories. It was a precious couple of days in many ways, but the sharing of stories, tall tales, and family history was a highlight, and even our littlest people were touched by the legacy conveyed over those few days.

Such generational connection is rare in our culture. It takes time, intentionality, curiosity, and mutual respect. But the return on the investment is rich, and the legacy promised is full of hope. That's our vision with "Made for More." Meaningful relationships that cross generations build strong, hope-filled foundations for gospel impact in the church and, ultimately, in our families and communities.

If you attended a Made for More conference, you have already been gifted with a powerful and compelling apologetic for intergenerational discipleship. God's character, His purpose for creation and, in particular, gender distinctiveness and design provide the foundation for how we are to live together. Our identity, membership in an eternal family, our union with Christ, and our inheritance help to prepare us and give us a reference point for shared suffering and the inevitable experience of heartbreak. Finally, our growth in godliness happens when we integrate our faith into every day, intergenerational relationships that promote the kinds of legacy-building life experiences shared by my extended family around a fire pit in the backyard of a third-generation descendant.

Now what? We anticipate that if your church is like ours, you may feel somewhat daunted by the vision and paralyzed as you consider what's next. Be assured, we get it! We want you to be encouraged that this way of doing life together is possible, and your influence can be instrumental whether you are a staff person, lay leader, or a young mom who just wants to be a life-giver in your church family! With that in mind, we want to offer a few things that might invigorate your prayerful progress and help you to have reasonable, attainable expectations.

FOLLOWING A GRACIOUS MODEL

One of my earliest memories with my father was watching him dance with my mom. Music was integral to life in our home, and Mom and Dad would occasionally just spontaneously twist or

jitterbug or jive. Soon, I wanted to join, and my dad would position me on his feet and dance with me, holding my hands like a real dance partner. I was too young for him to teach me to dance (and I honestly have no rhythm anyway). Instead, I literally "followed him" on his own two feet.

"Teaching" intergenerational ministry is not without its benefits. (After all, we spent 8-10 hours teaching at Made for More!) However, academic instruction does not typically inspire change. Information alone has a limited lasting impact. My father could have sat me down and given me step-by-step instructions about dancing. But what he did was actually dance with me. And he did that with my sister and me until we were eight or nine years old! We "learned" to dance...and we loved it.

As you are thinking about integrating all that you have learned at Made for More, ask the Spirit to help you be creative. How can you model intergenerational friendships in winsome, inviting, gracious, and life-giving ways? Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Consider your own "circle of friends." Are "your people" characterized by varied generations? Do you have younger women who look to you for wisdom and direction and from whom you gain energy, joy, and a contemporary perspective on life/the world? Do you enjoy the company of older women from whom you gain wisdom and direction and who may need your energy, encouragement, and perspective? Your personal example of valuing a broadly generational influence for your own life will significantly impact those around you!
- If you are a leader (of anything!), build your team with women of all ages and invite different ones to bring generational collateral to the team. Planning menus, programs, icebreakers, music, decorations, and leading prayer times...each of these components of an event or a ministry effort can be reflective of generational influence. Giving a variety of women the opportunity to invest communicates value, respect, and the desire to understand one another and to grow.
- If you need help, either personally or in ministry, look to invite women from various generations. From planning your garden at home to serving on an interior design team at church, capitalize on the diversity of generations in your community! Include younger women, even elementary and pre-teen girls, in the mix! It may be appropriate for them to linger in the background a bit, but they will "catch" so much experience and wisdom as they watch!
- If you are a mom with daughters, look for women just a few years ahead of your girls and engage in a relationship with them. Invite them into your home. Go to their homes!

Do projects. Bake. Tackle something hard. Go to the grocery store. Just build bridges and foster relationships going over and back!

Can you see how putting on your dancing shoes and allowing younger women to hold on to you is so much more effective than simply giving them a lesson in dance? Are you inspired to gain dancing proficiency by holding on to one whose toes are already scuffed from years of experience?

CULTIVATING CURIOSITY

As I was leaving Bible study last week, I walked behind a 20-plus-year-old woman who was walking with one of our "Seniors." I heard them chatting like friends, but as they parted to go to their cars, I heard the younger woman say to the older, "I'm Braelyn. What's your name?" I was so surprised by that sweet young woman's intentional engagement with an older woman whom she had never met.

That "curiosity" instinct in younger women has always intrigued me. I am naturally introverted and reserved, and I don't love small talk. I don't know how to "make conversation." When I feel insecure or nervous, I tend to talk primarily about myself, my family, and my experience. Over the years, I have learned about initiating conversation, asking good questions, developing listening skills, and avoiding self-focused dialog from women just a generation behind me. They seem to have a better sense of themselves and a genuine, healthy curiosity about others.

This posture is especially valuable for fostering intergenerational relationships. As you consider how to press into what you gained at Made for More, ask the Holy Spirit to help you cultivate a holy and genuine curiosity about His work in the lives of the women around you who are a few steps behind or a few yards ahead.

Engaging others can be as simple as being prepared with a few easy questions to ask of the women who sit near you in church. Think of these as "hip pocket" questions—because you should always have them in your "hip pocket"! During the "welcome" time on Sunday morning, ask a woman who is perhaps younger or older than you: "Have you had a busy week?" "How long have you lived in ____?" "What are your plans for (a holiday)?" These questions are not invasive, but they invite another woman to share a little something of herself. When she does, prepare yourself to follow up with another question. And just like that, you've begun an intergenerational friendship!

If you are in a leadership role, be thoughtful about helping your team develop this skill and practice it. Keeping the "modeling" principle in mind, have a vision for expanding your circle so that each member of your team is seeking to grow new intergenerational, intentional friendships nurtured by curiosity. When you are together, make room to share encouraging stories of who you have come to know and what you have learned.

Moms, this is a powerful and appealing quality to encourage in your daughters! Even little girls who are "shy" can be challenged to think of one question to ask a Sunday school teacher, the older lady who sits next to you in church, or the College student who serves as a greeter at the door. Helping children and young adults to think for others and be interested in the lives of older people adds value to their own experiences.

I'm grateful that Braelyn has become a good friend. She models curiosity in our friendship, and I am persistently encouraged to become more like her. I want to be genuinely interested in people, not make assumptions, and not be focused on myself. We need more Braelyns in the church. Can I get an "Amen"?

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

One of the highlights of our reunion was the photo scavenger hunt that we staged in a local mall. We had teams that included people from every family, from three years old to seventy-five. The teams were tasked with taking crazy photos around the mall, with extra points awarded for including as many team members in the photo as possible. Seeing those silly photos with little, middle, and older people thoroughly enjoying the experience was a delight. No one was left out because of age, size, effort, or ability. The littlest team members took some of the pictures! Such joy!

Karen began our Made for More time together by laying the foundation that our journey with God toward our heavenly home ought to be one marked by gospel companionship that reflects our whole family. No one should be left behind.

And yet, they often are. Women stay on the fringe of friendship for a variety of reasons, but what is common to most is anxiety or fear. Fear of being misunderstood. Of being ignored. Of falling short. Young women are afraid that older women will judge them. Older women are afraid that young women will dismiss them. Fear keeps women isolated from one another, at least across generational boundaries. And such fear cripples gospel communities. What can we do?

We're running out of space here, but let's just "bullet point" some thoughtful considerations:

- Acknowledge the challenge. Put it on the table and talk about it in personal conversations and in places where you have influence.
- Do a little digging. Ask good questions to encourage women to talk about these awkward relational challenges. What has been their experience? What would they hope might be different? How can they grow in their own effort?
- Look for ways to dismantle assumptions. Consider your own heart. What assumptions are you making about younger/older women? What might be a better perspective?

Can you see how thoughtful, intentional effort has the potential to draw women from every life stage together? Can you picture a scene in which little women, middle women, and older women are posing together for a snapshot that will capture the best of each of them, made more beautiful by none being left behind, as they journey home together?

PSALM 78

To what end is all of this effort and care? Why go to so much trouble to expand our circle beyond what we have always enjoyed? Here's how the psalmist put it:

We will...tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done...that the next generation may know them, ...so that they should set their hope in God..."

We tell the coming generation what we know. We show them our lives and our own faith journey. Why? So that they should set their hope in God.

We listen to other generations telling us what they know. They show us their lives and their faith journey. Why? So that WE should set our hope in God.

We walk each other home. We show one another the way. We help one another avoid landmines and raging rivers. We share our provisions. We carry each other's burdens. ALL THE WAY HOME. Where we'll reunion with one another little, middle and old! What a day that will be!