

Spiritual Motherhood by Jane Tooher May 2018.

Interview questions from Kirsten McKinlay for Australian Church Record & GoThereFor

Jane, what does it mean to be a spiritual parent, and in particular a spiritual mother?

When someone becomes a parent – whether biologically, or through adoption or by fostering – it means, among other things, that they have the privilege and responsibility of teaching that child about God. Because God has revealed himself in his word the Bible, it means teaching their child God’s word, and modelling to them what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The child’s parents are primarily responsible for this teaching and modelling, (Pro 1:8-9; Eph 6:1-4).

Yet, as every parent knows, they are not the only ones who have spiritual influence on children. They are not the only people who have the responsibility to teach the next generation the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is also taught and modelled by members of the church family more generally. God doesn’t deliver new truths to each generation, but rather each generation is expected to pass on to the next generation the truth about God, (Ps 145:4).

This belief of the importance of the church family in teaching children can be seen formally within most denominations. Sunday Schools, catechism classes and Christian camps often involve children being taught by women and men other than their parents. Added to these formal structures are the normal everyday relationships a child may have with people outside their immediate family, informally teaching and modelling to them what it means to be a Christian. These ‘other voices’ are critical in reinforcing and extending the Christian witness of parents to their children.

The importance of other Christians to help us work out how to be followers of Jesus doesn’t cease when we become adults does it? It’s important at any age. Some of us haven’t grown up in Christian homes, but whether we have or haven’t had that privilege, God in his mercy has given us brothers and sisters in Christ to help us, (Col 3: 16; 1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:12-14; 10:24-25; Jam 5:16). Often these people are at a similar stage in the Christian walk to us. Sometimes they are those who have been a disciple of Jesus for longer than us, and provide mature, wise guidance and example. They become, in a very important sense, spiritual parents.

Being a spiritual parent means to help someone grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The most obvious biblical example of this is the apostle Paul, who often spoke of himself in these terms in passages such as 1 Thess 2:7-12; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; 2:3-5 and 1 Cor 4:14-17.

In 1 Thess 2:7-12 Paul explains the way that he, Silas, and Timothy lived and acted when they were with the Thessalonian church. They were like a nursing mother, affectionately taking care of her children, v 7, and that is why they shared both the gospel of God and their lives with them, v 8. They preached God's gospel to them, v 9. They provided them with an example of what it means to be 'holy and righteous and blameless in conduct', v 10. They were like a father with his children, exhorting each one of them and encouraging them to walk in a manner worthy of God, v11-12. It is wonderful how in this same passage the image of both mother and father is used to speak of what is involved in spiritual parenting.

1 Tim 1:2 and Tit 1:4 highlight what is the critical element in spiritual parenting. Paul calls Timothy 'my true child in the faith' and Titus 'my true child in a common faith'. 'The faith', this common faith, is why Paul is a spiritual father to Timothy and Titus. It is because of the gospel that they are united in Christ. It is because of the gospel that they belong to the same spiritual family. The reality of Paul being a spiritual parent is not just seen in his relationships with younger church leaders he is training such as Timothy and Titus, but those with congregation members more generally, e.g. 1 Cor 4:14-21.

Paul writes to the Corinthians to warn them because they are his beloved children, v 14. He has become their father in Christ Jesus through the gospel, v 15. Paul recognises that they could have countless instructors in Christ, but they can't have many fathers, v 15, and that is why he asks them to imitate him, v 16. This is also why he is sending them his dearly loved and faithful son in the Lord, Timothy, v 17. Paul is concerned for the Corinthians spiritually and tells the Corinthians that Timothy will remind them about his ways in Christ Jesus, just as he teaches in every church, v 17.

With the above passages we see Paul, who was mature in the faith, spiritually parenting those who needed guidance. Spiritual parenting is guiding someone less mature in the Christian faith towards maturity, hence the term parent. It involves sharing the gospel with them, modelling the faith to them, sharing your life with them, and rebuking and warning them. So it can be

uncomfortable at times. It can be exhausting. It can be discouraging. And it can involve rejection. It can be costly. But it can also be full of great joy.

Being a spiritual mother means you can help nurture others in the faith, whether male or female. Yet because I am a woman, I have more opportunities with other women. E.g. it is appropriate to meet with them privately one to one on a regular basis, whereas I would not be doing this with a man I wasn't related to.

What has this looked like in your own life?

My earliest memory of this happening was in Youth Group at the beginning of high school. My female leaders seemed so much older, yet in reality some were university age or just older. Of course they looked physically older than I did since I was only 13 years old, but they were also much more mature in the Christian faith. They lead Bible studies on Sundays, taught us how to pray, went to church with us, and then in time a group of us boy and girls met mid-week with a male and female leader to read through Jerry Bridges' *The Pursuit of Holiness*. These discussions helped me begin to understand more fully what it looked like to be a Christian.

The Pursuit of Holiness was the first Christian book I read outside of the Bible, and this led me to read other Christian books on my own. I read books by Helen Roseveare and Corrie Ten Boom, and these women, who I have never met, also in a sense, were spiritual mothers to me in that they showed me clearly what it meant to have Jesus as Lord of your life. There was no sitting on the fence, no apathy with these women. Being a follower of Jesus was costly. But they were so down to earth about it, so honest about their own weaknesses and failings, that I found them very relatable and I was very much challenged and encouraged by their priorities. The message from these women was clear: Being a Christian involved *every* aspect of your life, because your life now belonged to Jesus. You were bought at a price, (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Over the decades since high school God has given me a number of spiritual mothers, yet most of these were, and are not, formalised relationships where we met up regularly one to one, or where I am in a small group Bible study with them. This spiritual mothering has happened more occasionally, more informally. Some for a season, others for many years. One woman I see each Sunday at church, others much more infrequently.

Who have you spiritually mothered? How has it been an encouragement to you/them?

I have found that there are often younger Christian women who want to meet up with an older Christian woman and learn from them. I think the best way this can happen is reading God's word and praying together and this is what I have mostly done. Reading God's word together shapes your prayers, and shapes also what you choose to talk about. But I have also met up with women to read through Christian books. Many of the women I have met up have been training for vocational ministry and so we have worked through various ministry training papers focusing on Christian character, convictions and competencies.

I have found that no matter how young someone is, whether age or Christian maturity, I still learn so much from them. Not too long ago I was reading the Bible one to one with a teenager and I was blown away each week with her insights into God's word. It is an enormous privilege and joy being a spiritual mother. But it hasn't always gone smoothly. Some relationships of course take more effort than others. And still others years later have wandered from the faith.

How would you encourage those who feel grief at not having their own children in light of this?

Children are a wonderful gift from God and so it's no surprise that most women and men (Christian or not), want to have children of their own. The grief of not having children is very real, and that grief can manifest itself in so many different ways – despair, anger, fear, insecurities, loneliness, identity issues, withdrawal from relationships, denial, feelings of unworthiness, guilt, and many more.

Being a spiritual parent is very different to having your own children and it's important not to think they are same.

Although some may not have children of their own, they can be involved in spiritual parenting, and being a spiritual parent is an enormous blessing from God. It can be hard at times, but it can also bring indescribable joy. It can be very fulfilling and lead to great contentment because it involves you getting on with being a Christian and helping someone else do that also.

Being a spiritual parent helps us focus on the new creation and what will last for eternity. It helps us remember that the most significant thing is not whether you have children of your own or not, but whether you are a child of God, and so it helps you sit lightly to this world and the things of this age. It helps you realise that this life is all about getting ready for the next.

What would you say to someone who feels hesitant about/unqualified for the role of 'spiritual mother'?

I think hesitancy or lack of confidence is very real. Yet we can't live our lives in fear. God has given us all we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3), and our concern is to be women who trust God at his word in this. It is also recognising we are different in some ways to other women, in terms of gifts, abilities, personalities, Christian maturity, and life situation, and so the shape of being a spiritual mother will take many different forms depending on who we are, and that is good and right. God has gifted each of us for the building of his church (Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 12:1-31).

You don't have to have 'arrived' or be a spiritual giant to be a spiritual mother. It is about sharing your life and sharing the word with another sinful human being, and being real and acknowledging where you too have to grow. This is both helpful and important.

It's important to keep directing people to our Heavenly Father and not to create a dependence upon us as the spiritual mother. The relationship can all too easily transform itself into one where the key issue is having our desire met for significance and impact and relationship.

We can ask for help about how it could look in our lives from women who are older than us, or younger women who have done it, but we can also ask mature Christian men, including our pastors, how they think it could look in our life. They may have a woman that it would be good for us to meet up with. Our experience may end up being a really good fit with this woman we are spiritually mothering, in that particular things she wants help with we may have gone through.

I know of many women who have wanted to meet up with an older woman in the faith for general discipleship, but also other women who have wanted to meet up with a woman for more specific reasons. These specific reasons have

included helping them see what it means to be a Christian wife, a Christian mother (Tit 2:3-4), a wife in vocational ministry, a woman in vocational ministry, someone who struggles with issues to do with sexuality, or chronic illness.

There are also Christian women and men I know who have benefitted from older Christians who have been in a similar workplace, or similar career to them. These older sisters and brothers in the faith have modelled godly priorities, in the midst of many pressures on your character and time.

We all influence people. None of us are 'neutral' people. A person by very definition, being a relational being, can't be neutral. We all influence people in different ways, and being a spiritual mother is one way we can be very conscious in how we influence others. I think we can learn so much from women we are in a different generation to, so if you're not already, I would strongly urge you to consider being a spiritual mother or having a spiritual mother. This ministry may be short-term or longer term. It will take a variety of shapes. If you end up being a spiritual mother or daughter, I hope it is a great blessing to you and to others as the church of Jesus Christ is built.