I CLEARLY recall the day Ralph Yoder called to apologize to me. His opening greeting was riveting because I could think of nothing he had done wrong.

The day before, my son — who then was in elementary school — was with me at the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition in Moultrie, Ga. When we saw Ralph, I suggested Rusty ask his opinion on which pocketknife to buy at the hunting and sports building. Because I am a mere woman, Rusty didn’t — and still doesn’t. Ralph said he should have taken Rusty by the hand, walked to the building with him, examined all the knives and then helped him make the decision.

“That’s what my father would have done,” Ralph said.

I was relieved to be talking to him over the phone — because I cried. I was touched that a man could be so concerned about whether he gave a child his time.

Many years down the road, that still is impressive. I now, however, glory in knowing most men in the agricultural industry have a heart like Ralph’s, especially when children are involved.

That conversation came to mind again when Sam Moore, the Kentucky Farmer of the Year, showed me around his farm, gave me a tour of the new cabin for family gatherings, and told me about his grandchildren and the young farmers programs in Farm Bureau.

The young farmers are the next step in caring about children. Taking time for those near and dear to you takes an extra effort but often comes naturally. Taking time for someone else’s child often does not. It takes a heart like Ralph’s — and yours.

If we are to ensure that America continues to have a viable agricultural industry for generations to come, today’s farmers must not only steward the land, but also shepherd the next wave of farmers. Many won’t be in the next generation of your family.

It’s possible to do this while still building your agricultural operation. Look at the nine farmers of the year in the Swisher Sweet/Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition Southeastern Farmer of the Year competition. All are successful businessmen in the agriculture industry. All have a resume that speaks not only to their commitment to advancing the industry, but also to the efforts they make and the hand up they offer to those who will follow them.

Not all of us have the resources to be the chairman or chairwoman, the president, the leader. But we all can find a niche, be it one conference a year, one day a month, or one hour a week, when we can take the time and give our experience to those who will follow us. We must put the next generation of farmers on our priority list.

Add a name to your prayer list

As we go to press, Bobby Batson, who manages the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year program, is battling a recurrence of the cancer against which he won Round 1 last year. Please remember him in your prayers.