

# Grown-up MK renews French connection

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He's returning to become a church planter in the land of his youth.

(Photos courtesy of Stephen Marshall)

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By **Rebekah Hardage**

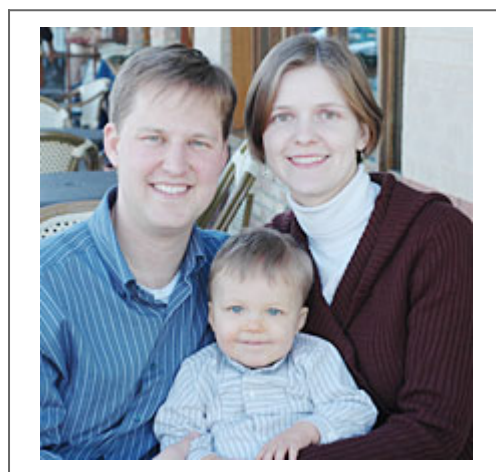
*Communications Intern*

CARROLLTON—Stephen Marshall's life has been filled with one French connection after another.

Marshall grew up as a child of missionaries to France, and he married a French woman.

But just when he thought his time living in France were behind him, God opened doors for him to become a church planter in the land of his youth.

Marshall, a staff member at Trinity Valley Baptist Church in Carrollton, will relocate to France by the end of this year along with his wife, Sabrina, who is expecting their second child, and their son Alexi. Next January, he hopes to launch a multi-cultural church in Lyon as Trinity Valley's staff missionary to France.



Stephen and Sabrina Marshall, along with their son, Alexi, will relocate to France later this year. Marshall will serve as staff missionary for Trinity Valley Baptist Church in Carrollton and help start a multi-cultural congregation in Lyon.

Marshall joined the Trinity Valley staff as children's minister about three years ago while he was attending Dallas Theological Seminary. His responsibilities have since expanded to youth.

Trinity Valley had planned to plant a church in Vancouver, Canada, through an established partnership with the Denton Baptist Association, but those plans began to fizzle.

After sending seven members to France in January, the church became convinced a church plant there was what God had planned. Marshall knew it too. "God just confirmed that this is what he wanted us to do," he said. But he had to overcome some serious reservations.

"I didn't want to go back, because I know what it's going to take, and I didn't think I could make it," Marshall said.

Evangelicals in France make up only 1 percent of the French population of 60 million, he noted. Muslims, in comparison, represent about 8 percent of the population.

Christians of any stripe are the minority in France. Marshall's wife, Sabrina, is the only Christian in her family, he pointed out.

Growing up the child of missionaries to France, Marshall has seen countless missionaries move overseas, learn the language and culture, and then give up and come home after just a few years.

But Marshall and his wife have made a lifetime commitment to mission work in France. Missionaries—particularly in a non-Christian culture like France—first must build trust with the people they are working with so they can be sure “you’re not just another cult,” he said. If missionaries will build relationships, after years of trust and teaching, many people will come to know God, he added.

Though the work will be challenging, Marshall knows he is not alone. Since he and his family decided to move to France, they have received prayer and financial support from Denton Baptist Association.

Gary Loudermilk, executive director of the association, explained, “We discussed the idea of having more of a global presence and thought this was a good opportunity to explore that avenue a little more in depth.”

The association offered Marshall financial support, as well as a chance to network through other churches. Loudermilk also hopes in the future, the association will be able to send mission teams to work with Marshall and his family.

Marshall and his family will seek to start an intentionally multi-cultural congregation in Lyon. France is filled with people from North Africa, Vietnam, Cambodia and China, as well as an abundance of Eastern Europeans, and “we hope that the beauty of the gospel will transcend all of these cultures.”

Marshall and his wife are both fluent in French and familiar with the culture, so they won’t experience the shock most missionaries do when they first arrive overseas. After his arrival, Marshall will begin to take a class to help him improve his writing, especially in respect to legal

documentation.

Trinity Valley Pastor David Bird feels confident France was the right place for Marshall and his family to serve. “Everywhere we turn around we find another French connection,” he said.

For example, the Trinity Valley youth met a 16-year-old French exchange student who was attending summer camp with a Houston church. Marshall was able to lead the young man to faith in Christ. They have kept in touch, and Marshall has contacted churches in the young man’s hometown so they can continue to minister to him after he returns home next month.

As he and his family prepare to move to France, Marshall is praying for the lives he hopes the church plant will be able to touch.

He also is praying for the country as a whole. The newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with French evangelicals—a historic first. Marshall prays the meeting signals a positive relationship between evangelicals and the French government.

Marshall is also praying for his family. He realizes his children may be the only ones in their school from a strong Christian home, and he prays they will stand firm. “They will be bombarded with opinions and theories, and I pray that they will be able to see the truth through that.”

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