

Hometown summer internship leads to ministry abroad

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LA GRANGE—Pastor Jonathan Smith of First Baptist Church in La Grange had no idea how much the life of his summer intern, Stephen Jones, would change after just a few months in church ministry.

At the beginning of his internship in April, the 24-year-old Jones had never boarded an airplane. By September, he'd accepted a call to minister full-time as a youth pastor in Lubbecke, Germany.

The practical experience an internship provides often helps define people's gifts and passions—and it can verify their call to ministry, Smith said.

Smith has served as pastor at First Baptist Church about 18 months. After getting to know Jones, who grew up at First Baptist of La Grange, Smith invited him to serve the church as an intern for a few months and explore his opportunities in ministry.

Stephen Jones worked at a baseball camp in Germany. After spending time in Germany as an intern, Jones now feels called to serve there.

"I saw some leadership potential (in Jones) ... so I asked him to pray about filling this internship position for us," Smith said.

Jones graduated from East Texas Baptist University with a degree in elementary education; so, children's ministry came easily for him.

But during the summer, Jones also taught Sunday school, leading worship and making hospital visits with the pastor. He enjoyed the variety.

“As you get to know how different ministries work, you get a better sense of how you might fit in ministry, either in the church or in any other mission opportunity,” Jones said.

That “other mission opportunity” found Jones in July on a weeklong mission trip to Germany. In July, members of First Baptist Church of La Grange joined in ministry with First Baptist Church of The Woodlands in the city of Lubbecke. The church in La Grange now is exploring a possible partnership with a German congregation.

During his week abroad, Jones began considering long-term ministry in Germany and started talking to other church members about the idea. Once he boarded the plane home, he knew his life was about to change.

“By the time I stepped off that plane, I just had a very strong feeling I’d be going back,” Jones said.

Jones spent the rest of the summer discerning his call to minister in Germany. Jones made a second visit to Lubbecke, this time to meet with church elders at Evangelisch-Freikirchliche Gemeinde and confirm his call to serve as youth pastor there.

God was clearly at work, Smith said, recalling, “One of the things he said to me was, ‘When the airplane wheels left the runway, a still small voice said to me, ‘This is where you’re supposed to be.’”

Cultural differences and the challenge of learning German could make the transition daunting for Jones, but his gifts in relational ministry will be well put to use, Smith said. He described Jones as “encouraging, kind, caring and compassionate.”

Even though Jones doesn’t presently see himself in long-term church ministry, his service in Germany shows commitment to God’s leadership.

Many details about living abroad are unclear, but both Jones and Smith remain confident in God's faithfulness and guidance.

"It's never been God's plan to hide his will for his children. ... (Jones) is really stepping out in faith," Smith said.